

A Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King 2014
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It's the last Sunday of the church year. Can you believe that Advent starts next week? Only 31 praying days left 'til Christmas. And as the year winds to a close, our Sunday readings bring us to focus on last things, and the promise of ultimate transformation that God holds before us and the world.

And as a symbol of that ultimate transformation, of a world where we live according to God's desires, it is traditional to call this Sunday "The Feast of Christ the King." But as a symbol of divine purpose, kingship presents some problems for us. It is true that "kingship" is all over the Bible, and is associated with Jesus from his birth. But king of what? What kind of king?

For us twenty-first century children of the American Revolution, when we think of kings, we can look to the figurehead monarchs of our day, but we are more likely to think of despotic King George, or, likelier still, Henry VIII or Louis the Sun King – monarchs from the days when being king really meant something.

And that's part of the problem. Because in Jesus' day, and in the Hebrew scriptures, being king really meant something *else*. The closest modern equivalent to a biblical king would be Afghani or Somali warlords. Nation, in the Bible, means a group of people related by birth, a clan, or a tribe, and the kings of the

nations were the men who led their tribes into battle. And when scripture talks about “the nations,” it means the other tribes – the “not us” tribes and their warlords.

And clearly, Jesus is not that kind of king, not a warlord at all.

Jesus never, according to scripture, admits to being a king at all, even when Pontius Pilate asks him directly about it, or when Peter calls him “My God and King.” But if Jesus is cagey about his own kingship, he never stops talking about the kingdom of God. But “kingdom” is just as difficult a word for us as “king,” maybe more so because we think of “kingdom” primarily in geographical terms. This was certainly not true in Jesus’ time and place, when “kingdom” primarily meant “kingship.” When Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, he is not talking about being king of another world, he’s talking about having a divine source for his authority in this world. And when he talks about the kingdom of God, he’s not talking about heaven, he’s talking about a new world order. When he says that the kingdom of God is very near indeed, he doesn’t mean that paradise is almost close enough to touch, but that divine love and justice has begun erupting into the world we know.

So in today’s reading, when Jesus talks about the king coming to judge the nations, just what is he talking about? The first thing we would do well to remember is that Matthew’s gospel was written for a community that was made up of Jews and

gentiles – of the Nation and “the nations,” you might say, and was wrestling constantly with the question of who was in and who was out, and whether you had to be Jewish in order to be a follower of Jesus. And today’s gospel lesson, about who among the nations – the outsiders – would be welcome in the reign of God, along with last Sunday’s lesson of the wise and foolish bridesmaids and who would be recognized by the bridegroom at the door to the banquet, seem to speak directly to those questions, and need, I think, to be taken together to get the whole picture.

The ones with oil for their lamps in last week’s parable, are the ones who are recognized by God and welcomed in, and this week’s story about hospitality to strangers seems to be showing us what that oil is that lights our faces enough to be recognized – we know God, and are known by God, through our ministry of hospitality and healing.

So just as Jesus professes to be a different kind of king, the claim and the call he makes on us in these stories is to be a different kind of people, a different kind of community. And the call is for now. One part of that call is to be transformed in the way we welcome the stranger, the way we offer hospitality. The community of God welcomes the stranger not by insisting that she conform to the norms of the community. To say that you are welcome here if you are like us or are willing to become like us is to say that you are not welcome. The community of God

understands that strangers bring their own stories, their own experiences, their own traditions, their own songs, and doesn't merely accept but embraces the knowledge that those stories, experiences, traditions and songs will change the community.

But that, speaking honestly, is not the way the church often welcomes people. As a church and as individuals, these days we far too often find ourselves struggling to do as much as we did in the past without the numbers, whether people or pledge, our parents enjoyed. And we say to ourselves, "We need to get more people here to increase our pledge base." "We need to get more people here to do the work of the church." "We need to get more people here to fill our programs and fund our outreach and make the place more lively." And because we say that to one another, what we end up saying to the world, in subtle and sometimes not-very-subtle ways is, "Come share our poverty."

We have, in many of our congregations and dioceses, become a mendicant church – a beggar church.

And as evangelism campaign slogans go, "Come share our poverty" is not very inviting.

But that's not the problem. The problem is that it's a lie. We cannot invite anyone to share our poverty, because we are not poor. As Christians, we can never know what it is like to have to fulfill God's mission with limited resources, because we do not have limited resources.

We have God.

We have the promise that Jesus is with us whenever we gather. We have a rich tradition of community and worship. We have the Prayer Book, and our music, and one another. We have our stories, and our families, and our neighbors. We have love. We have everything that matters.

So we need to stop lying to the world and to ourselves by saying that we need others to join us to help us in our poverty. We need to tell the truth. And the truth is that we are wealthy beyond imagining, and we need others to join us because without their help we cannot hope to share all the abundance God has given us with a needy world. We are so rich that we cannot shovel our treasure out the door fast enough without more friends to lift the shovels.

And the truth is that the more people who join us, the more we will need, because each person brings new treasures to us – new stories, new hope, new love, and we will need still more help to spread the wealth.

Last week I was having chapel time with our nursery school, and we were talking about Thanksgiving and all the things we are thankful for. And I had been priming them for the big question, so that when I asked them what God gives us, they all jumped in with “everything!” But in one of the groups, a young boy added in a loud voice, “And macaroni and cheese!”

And that's just about right. We are so blessed, so wealthy, that God gives us everything *and macaroni and cheese*. That's pretty much grace in a nutshell. So as the new year begins, and we ponder Jesus' different kind of kingship, enthroned on the cross and in the manger, and our different kind of community, blessed with all of God's gifts and macaroni and cheese, remember the stranger, and remember that in your giving you are making yourself known to God.

Amen.