

King of Kings and Lord of Lord

November 26, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

This is the Last Sunday of Pentecost. It is also known as *Christ the King Sunday*. The Roman Catholics and the Lutherans recognize it as such on their calendars. We do not, but probably will with the next Prayer Book revision. As the last Sunday of the Church Year, it is the Sunday on which we celebrate that Jesus is, as the Collect for Proper 29 (p. 185/p. 236) declares, *the King of Kings and Lord of Lords*, whose will it is to restore all of Creation into its Godly fulfillment, and whose will it is to free the enslaved and divided peoples of the world *under his most gracious will*.

However, the *King* and *Lord* imagery has its problems. To Jewish and Islamic ears this prayer would be heard as the worst kind of Christian imperialism. On the other hand, there are some Christian traditions that would joyfully embrace the language of this Collect as a sign of the spiritual superiority of the Christian faith. Ours is not one of them. The images that draw on the functions of rulership date from the ancient Near East, to medieval Europe, to Seventeenth Century England. That is, they represent the kingly power to wage war and establish law. These

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two functions, which comprise the core of royal power, were the basis for an ordered society. The King *was* the State, and his decisions *were* the acts of the State. The capacity to wage war protected the State externally and enforcement of the Law protected the State internally. And the taxes of the King fuelled it all. But, is this prayer really speaking the language of power?

Despite the heavy and masculine totalitarian imagery conveyed by the Collect, the theme of *Christ the King* provides an unswerving and undeniable spiritual truth. It provides a sort of spiritual surgery that comes at the end of the Christian year, compelling us to sever all false attachments by reminding us to whom we belong and whom we are to serve. *Christ the King* says we are not our own. We are not an *autonomous* people, we are a *submitted* people. We are not spiritual drifters looking for the newest, most appealing *spa of the spirit*. We live in Christ and under Christ with all the exciting possibilities and sacrificial responsibilities it implies. In this sense we are all alike and at the same time all unique. In 2nd Corinthians Paul wrote *we no*

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longer are to live for ourselves, but for Christ who died and rose for us (2 Cor. 5:15).

Submission to the rule of God isn't the kind of human submission we ordinarily think of. Perhaps one of the First Ladies of our country expressed the saddest and most disturbing kind of submission several years ago when she acknowledged that, essentially, she had sacrificed everything in her life that she considered precious to advance the political career of her husband.

But, the Christian way is different. It's harder and it's easier. Christ says *give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want YOU! I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or fill it, or crown it. I want to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires, which you think innocent, as well as the ones you think*

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wicked. I want the works. I will give you a new self instead. In fact I will give you MYSELF! My own will shall become yours.

Christianity *is* both harder and easier than what we are trying to do i.e. trying to be good, living for others in a discontented grumbling way, trying to let our mind and heart go their own way, and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And this is what Christ warned us we could *not* do. Christ himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard: *Take up your cross* and be prepared for sacrifice. The next minute he says, *my yoke is easy and my burden is light*. He means both and we can see why both are true.

The real problem of the Christian life comes the very moment we get up in the morning. All the wishes and demands of the day rush at us like wild beasts. What we have to do is simply shove them all back where they came from and then listen to that other voice, take that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in, and so on all day,

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standing back from our natural distractions, standing under the rule of the Spirit, haltingly at first, perhaps, but then with determination. When Jesus said *Be perfect*, he meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment and it can be hard.

It's easy to think that the Church has a lot of different goals, education, buildings, missions, and evangelism, worship. It is just as easy to think that the State has a lot of different goals, military, political, economic and what not. But things are simpler than that. The State, as I mentioned earlier, exists simply to promote and protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. In the same way, the Church exists for nothing else but to draw people to Christ. When it does that, all else flows from that. When it does not do that, everything else is redundant. God became incarnate for no other purpose. It is the Incarnate Lord who is our focal point. The balance, peace and wholeness we long for are seen in him. In him the torn fabric of our humanity is rewoven, its integrity restored. The degree to which we identify with him is the degree to which we ourselves

King of Kings and Lord of Lord

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are rewoven and restored, The more we get what we call *ourselves* out of the way and let him truly rule in our hearts, the more truly *ourselves* we become. If we give up ourselves, we will find ourselves. Look for Christ and you will find *him* and the Christ-life as well. It's at that point when the Kingdom *comes on earth as in heaven* and it's at that point when the King of Kings and Lord of Lords rules from the inside out.

AMEN