

Jesus—the Leader, the Servant
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Last Sunday after Pentecost (Christ the King Sunday);
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C
November 25, 2007

Today, the last Sunday after Pentecost, is also known as Christ the King Sunday—a day to remember and recognize Christ’s sovereignty over us and the world. This is sometimes difficult in our culture, for we have no direct experience with kings. After all, our country’s independence arose from an opposition to the royal decrees and actions of King George III (and British parliament). Being opposed or at least suspicious of the idea of a ruler with such absolute power is part of our American psyche, starting with our carefully worded Constitution with its checks and balances of power. We are a people proud of our independence, our individual rights, and in an almost perverse sort of way, enjoy seeing those on top tumble a little now and then.

We have to remember, however, that not all kings were power-hungry, manipulative, deceitful, or tyrannical. There have been many just and honest kings as well. The Bible lifts up the names of David, Solomon, and Josiah as faithful and good rulers—good even if not perfect. Our list of saints includes at least a half-dozen kings and queens known for their piety, good works, or martyrdom.

One such martyr whose feast was celebrated only this past week is Edmund, King of East Anglia. Edmund rose to the throne in 855 at the tender age of fifteen, a distant cousin of the previous king who died without leaving an heir. Little is officially known of his rule. Legend states that he was a pious and just ruler, concerned with the poor, widows, and orphans, and a great supporter of the Church.

What is known that in the late 860’s, the Danish armies invaded England. This juggernaut of a takeover was led by two brothers, who burned monasteries and churches, destroyed villages, and killed nearly anyone in their path. Town after town fell to the Danes.

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When they eventually reached East Anglia, the brothers offered to spare Edmund and his population if he would acknowledge their supremacy, become a puppet king, and outlaw the Christian faith. Bishop Humbert and the other bishops encouraged Edmund to take the Danes' offer, so as to spare the peoples (and their own) lives.

King Edmund, however, refused. He stated he would die for his country rather than submit to foreign rule, and would never renounce his faith. Legend has it that he told the Dane's messenger that he would never submit to a pagan war-lord, unless 'he first submit in this land to Christ the Savior in faith'.

Needless to say, though Edmund and his armies fought bravely, they were eventually defeated; King Edmund was captured, tortured, shot through with arrows and beheaded. (Bishop Humbert met a similar fate). Our LFF lists the date as November 20, 870, though some reports list the date as a year earlier. Edmund was 29 when he died for his country and for his Lord—refusing to sacrifice his people to pagan rule (or sacrifice his faith) in order to save his own life.

Our gospel reading for today also speaks of another King who sacrificed as well—a King named Jesus who loved God's people so much that he was willing to die rather than leave them in the darkness of sin and death. A King that said, "I'll go first" when it came to being willing to pay the price for living God's way, rather than saying "you go first" or "you go instead of me". Such a King does more than just reign—he leads.

There is a lot of talk about leadership these days. We talk about promoting leadership qualities in our children, run leadership training seminars at work, have institutes dedicated to developing leaders, sell many books on the topic. It seems like everyone wants to be a leader, or a more effective one; and yet, we still struggle with exactly what good leadership is. Is it being

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brave and bold and decisive—or is it being supportive and cooperative and focus on building consensus? Are we to be firm with those who don't achieve the expected results—or are we to be understanding and help discover and develop a person's strengths? Should undesirable behavior be punished—or re-directed? The possibilities are seemingly endless. And perhaps that is the point: being a good leader is taking the time to figure out the right approach to a particular situation or person. After all, an effective military leader will most likely have a different style than say, a clergyperson. (one could hope). This comes from their different situations, their different goals. And this is how it should be, for a cookie-cutter leadership style does no one any good.

Jesus is the kind of leader that the world often has a hard time grasping. He was not a leader that stayed behind, guarded within strong walls, while others went ahead and did the hard work of paving the way. He refused to stand on privilege and power, and take the best for himself. He did not consider himself so important that everyone else was considered expendable. His leadership status was not grounded in hanging out with rich and powerful, playing the requisite games of palace politics and social sabotage, so as to further his own interests. Instead, Jesus is a leader who serves.

As a servant leader, Jesus spent time serving among those who needed it most—the powerless, the poor, the sick, the outcasts. He went out seeking them, rather than staying behind palace walls. He let us know that in God's kingdom, every person is important, and no one is considered expendable. He often confronted the rich and powerful, reminding them of their responsibilities, rather than trying to cultivate their favor and thus gain rewards. Most of all, he shared all that he had with others; even to the point of giving up his life so that others may live.

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We too are called to follow our King by exhibiting the same servant leadership that has been modeled for us. We are to focus on justice and righteousness, seeking out those who have not yet heard the good news of God's love, forgiveness and redemption. We are asked to share in Kingdom work, the hard work of love and care and restoration. But we do not work alone—for the King that charges with this work toils alongside us, and through us; reminding us that no matter we have been asked to go that he has gone there first.

King Edmund, as powerful as he was, recognized the limits of his sovereignty. His allegiance was not to himself, but to Christ, and he would not deny his King of Kings. There are those that will say that his sacrifice mattered little, for his people fell under pagan rule nonetheless. But like Christ, Edmund did not seek to save himself at the expense of others. He willingly gave of himself so that others may know about true life—everlasting life. That he is a beloved saint in England and held up as an example of steadfast faith is a testament to a king's sacrifice.

Unlike Edmund (or King George III), our King, Christ the King, still reigns today. Evidence of his Kingdom is found wherever love and compassion are exercised, wherever the poor are fed, the sick are cared for, the outcasts are invited in. May our King always find signs of his kingdom here at Grace Church, and in our hearts.

Amen.