

A Different Kind of King

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday

Proper 29, Year B, RCL

November 22, 2009

We as humans have a thing for authority, or rulers, or in light of today's reading, kings. We seek leaders, encourage our children to be one. I guess it has to do with wanting to define our destiny, but if we're honest, it also has to do with influencing others and power. After all, if you're the leader, you have at least a hand in setting the course for those who follow. In the best of leaders, this also comes with the realization that you are responsible for those who follow you, and should care for them and their welfare. After all, you can't be a leader if there is no one left to follow you.

This wanting leadership, for someone to be in charge, is exhibited again and again in Scripture, particularly in the post-Exodus period in the Old Testament. The Israelites, now settled in the land God promised to them, find themselves besieged again and again by outside nations, especially the Philistines. Each time a threat, external or internal, appears, God raises up a leader and eventually the matter is dealt with and the leader, if still alive, steps back from their military role at the end of the crisis. For the King of the Israelites is to be God, the Lord, the One who freed them from the Egyptians and brought them to this land. In fact, in the book of Judges, which includes the stories of Gideon and Samson and Deborah, it says repeatedly, "In those days there was no king in Israel." The people were responsible for themselves and each other, to defend their own borders, to do what is right before God. The Judges were to help settle disputes, and to lead when called.

But things shift in the time of Samuel, a prophet and judge of Israel. Samuel is getting older, and the people see no suitable leader rising to replace him; his own sons are not worthy. And so,

A Different Kind of King

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday
Proper 29, Year B, RCL
November 22, 2009

tired of fighting their own battles and being responsible for themselves, the people clamor for a king to govern them, so they can be like other nations. God tells Samuel to give them what they want, for it is clear they have rejected God as their king; they do not trust God to solely protect and lead and guide them anymore. But first, God says to Samuel, warn them about what having a human king will mean.

A king, Samuel warns the people, will take your sons to be his warriors, take your daughters to be his servants, take the best of your fields and vineyards for his own, and demand taxes and tithes from you to pay for an army and a dwelling and a court. You will lose your freedom once more, he states. In other words, be careful of what you wish for. But the people were adamant: a king, they said, will govern us and fight our battles—in other words, they wanted someone else to carry the burden, someone else to take responsibility. And so, Samuel, with the Lord's guidance, appointed Saul the first official King of Israel. And thus begins the great stories of Saul and David and Solomon, and all that follows until the Exile.

But something happened to the people's faith as well as their lives when it became tied up in government and royal hands. It became less theirs, and more a function of the state. A temple and shrines were built, but the priests of the Temple and court prophets sometimes seemed to serve the king's desires over God's. God raises up prophets again and again to speak the truth to power, but until the Exile (when Israel and Judah were overrun by the Assyrians and Babylonians), their words often fell on deaf ears. Occasionally a king would give heed, and reform the nation's ways, but it was all too little, too late.

A Different Kind of King

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday
Proper 29, Year B, RCL
November 22, 2009

It is said that perhaps the same thing happened when Constantine won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge under the sign of the Cross in 312 and began his conversion to Christianity in the year 313. Until then, Christianity, while growing, was still a religion that experienced much persecution, and many of our early martyred saints are evidence of that. For Christians call Christ their King, and it is him that they follow. To be baptized in the Christian faith at that time meant to give up the notion of being a career soldier, or serving in the pagan Roman government, or any number of other ‘unsuitable’ professions. It truly was a life-changing decision—and a risky one at that. But then, within a matter of a few years, Christianity became the norm; Constantine had decided to unite his empire not only politically and militarily but also unite it religiously—and that religion was Christianity. The Church all of a sudden found itself connected to power, endowed with resources, and having free reign to spread the good news of the Gospel. The benefits of royal favor led to large amounts of money being available to pursue all sorts of charitable acts, and also led to royal influence on the Church’s theology and tradition and preaching. Now Christians became the norm, throughout all aspects of society, including government and the military. Church leaders gained a secular power that was unthinkable even a generation before. The faith that encouraged its members to resist the ways and powers of the world, to be willing to risk all for the sake of the Gospel, and live *in* the world but *not* be part of it found itself being a power *of* the world, safe and secure in its institutions and state support. Indeed, it has been said that “When Constantine took up the cross, the Church laid it down”, and if we are honest with ourselves, there is more than a kernel of truth in that.

A Different Kind of King

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday
Proper 29, Year B, RCL
November 22, 2009

In today's readings, we hear descriptions of Christ as King; a king who has been given everlasting dominion over all, a king who is the beginning and the end, the ruler of the kings of the earth. And all of that is true. But Jesus' kingship was not won by force and military might; it was not received in a negotiated truce. For Jesus' kingdom is not, as Jesus said to Pilate, "from this world." It has not and will not be established or concerned with the world's ways. Instead, it was won by his obedience to God, even unto death; by Jesus' willingness to sacrifice for the salvation of all. It is not a kingdom about land, or money, or setting up a court that enslaves others to meet its needs—it is about freeing others from sin and death, about reconciliation and wholeness and restoration. It is a kingdom that rules over the hearts of those who choose to be in it, with love as its primary rule of law. It is a kingdom that calls its subjects—that is, us—to resist the lure of the easy way out, to not buy into a culture that places money as the measure of all things, and to oppose the world's siren song to pit one group against another through fear and intimidation. Instead, the kingdom we belong to, the King that we promise to follow, invites us to lives of loving service and sacrifice, to a life dedicated to valuing all of God's creation through and in hospitality and generosity, as well as acts of healing and peace. Building a kingdom by conquering one heart at a time may seem like a slow way to go, but for our Lord, it is the only way—for our hearts and transformed lives are the only territory God is interested in.

So let us focus our leadership development here, in building up the Kingdom of God, by honoring the One whose life was given for us out of love, and following him through death to new life. For our King's power is in the cross, and not armies, political connections or great

A Different Kind of King

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday

Proper 29, Year B, RCL

November 22, 2009

architecture; and so our witness must be grounded in the cross as well—lives of sacrifice, lives of service, lives ruled by love.

For, as Paul Harrison wrote, “Wherever God rules over the human heart as King, there is the Kingdom of God established.” Amen.