



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Jeremiah 23:1-6
Second Reading Colossians 1:10-20
Gospel Luke 23:35-43

Unlike some of you who got to wear those fancy badges on Remembrance Sunday, I have never met a reigning monarch. I think I saw the King of Sweden once, while I was in university that country, but it was a fleeting glimpse of him entering a train station and didn't involve anything personal. I met Princess Anne when she visited the British Embassy in Helsinki, but it wasn't particularly impressive to me, (and she's not the Queen, after all.) It's not that I am against the monarchy- any monarchy- it's just that I haven't had the chance to experience the awe of being in the presence of the Queen, or a King or an Emir, or anybody, really, that has the kind of personal authority that we associate with being a sovereign. That's why today's celebration, known as "Christ the King" is a bit odd for us all. Our idea of kingship is nostalgic, romantic or hostile, depending on one's republican sentiments. Calling Christ our "king" doesn't mean a thing, really- not anymore. Or it means the wrong thing, which is worse.

Being somewhat skeptical of the theme of this Sunday does make it easier, however, to deal with our Gospel reading today in which our "king" is reigning from a distinctly unregal location- the cross. In Luke's narration of the events of Good Friday, the title "king" is used sarcastically- it is a sign that the Romans put up over Jesus' head to tell passersby what his crime was. The irony wasn't lost on those who saw Jesus

suffering and dying there: "Some king!" "Some savior!" We can deal with irony a lot easier than we can with sovereignty. So what does it mean to say that our King reigns from the Cross?

St Paul tries to help us in his letter to the Christians at Colossae. The passage from today's New Testament reading is virtually a hymn, and some versions of the bible print it in verse:

*He is the image of the unseen God
And the first-born of all creation,
For in him were created
All things in heaven and earth;
Everything visible and everything invisible,
Thrones, Dominions, Sovereignties, Powers-
All things were created through him and for him.*

Paul is taking us far away from the idea of Jesus as a rabbi from rural Galilee who got in trouble with the law. In this passage, this hymn, he is the Christ, the "image of God" who participates in Creation long, long before he came to earth as a human being. It is here that Paul is leading the Christian Church far away from the Jewish Old Testament roots I spoke about last week, and wedding it to Greek philosophical terms and concepts.

But perhaps the most significant thing for us today is the last part of Paul's hymn in which the Cross features prominently:

*As he is the Beginning,
He was first to be born from the dead,
So that he should be first in every way;*

Because God wanted all perfection

To be found in him

And all things to be reconciled through him and for him,

Everything in heaven and everything on earth,

When he made peace

By his death on the cross.

Here then is yet another reason why the Cross is the symbol of our faith and why its form is so prominent in this building, towering over everything we do here.

Reconciliation is what we look to Jesus for: reconciling us to God and to each other by his atoning sacrifice on the Cross and his identity as Lord, or sovereign, of his people the Church. But this example of kingship is troubling because it appears that our king is a loser. In fact, Jesus is telling us pointedly that power in the Kingdom of God is a thing of moral authority, not arrogance and pride.

The first reading today, from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, speaks in warning: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" [I suggested to Jenny that she turn and point her finger at me while she read that!] Fortunately, the use of the word "shepherd" in Jeremiah probably has more to do with the king than with the clergy, but it makes an important point about anyone in a position of power: they will be held accountable for misleading and ignoring their charges.

I read this week about yet another scandal that rocked a megachurch in the U.S. dealing with its leader whose heir-apparent turned out not to be his nephew but his son by his brother's wife. "Power corrupts" they say, and "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." This is true in the Church as much as in politics, and is in fact even more visible because of the contrast such behavior reveals compared with the high ideals of the Christian faith and life. And it is something that clergy like me must live with every day.

There was a time when I perhaps thought that being a priest gave me special license to do what I wanted. If I failed my congregation, I could say that it served them right for setting me on a pedestal that I could so easily fall off. Perhaps also, I shared with the worst of the fallen clergy the thought that being in God's service somehow made me impervious to punishment and discovery. Those days may be past, but the memory still haunts me, particularly when I am criticized for a failure in my professional work. Even if the accusation is false, even if it is unfair, I know that I am probably guilty of worse things. The "glories" of being a priest, overestimated at the best of times, the authority and the respect and the power that it is supposed to bring is also the worst of temptations. Satan loves the clergy, because they present such easy targets and because they are so skilled at rationalizing bad behavior.

For me, then, today's celebration of Christ the King might be the cause for cynicism if I only thought about Jesus dressed up in medieval vestments with a crown, scepter and orb. What kind of amateur theatrical king would that be? What kind of authority could he possibly hold? Instead, we are given an unlikely image of kingship, as far removed from fairy tales or even Buckingham Palace as can be, and a pathetic, small voice of one criminal speaking to another, cross to cross: "Have you no fear of God at all? You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Some king. Some kingdom. But, somehow that says it all and it speaks of power and authority and reconciliation more than any earthly king or queen could command. And I, for one, am thankful.