

Christ the King Sermon for Saint Paul and Saint Luke churches

Sunday November 24, 2024

The Reverend Martha Harris, Priest in Charge

Scripture:

Daniel 7:9 -10, 130-14

Psalm 93

Revelation 1: 4b -8

John 18: 33-37(38b)

What does it mean to be a Christian Today?

There is a movie in theatres now that is a suspenseful thriller, set in Rome when Roman Catholic Cardinals are sequestered in a conclave to select the next Pope. In the Anglican Communion, where the head of the church just resigned, there may well be a similar discussions underway to select a successor to Justin Welby who resigned last week after failing to report a case of sexual abuse by a priest.

I won't spoil the plot for those who have not seen Conclave - perhaps you read the bestselling novel. The acting, script and cinematography are very well done. The performance by Ralph Finess who plays Cardinal Lawrence,

the convener of the conclave is especially impressive. He offers an opening homily at the beginning of the conclave which includes this line:

“If there is one sin that I have come to fear above all others, it is certainty. Without doubt, there is no mystery, and no need for faith.”

We have a clash of opinions in our national discourse about what it means to be a Christian. Do we wrap ourselves in the American flag and proclaim that Christianity is the only true religion? Do we forget that the founders of our country came from Europe and England to escape religious persecution. William Penn, founder of Penns Woods, envisioned Pennsylvania as a place where people can be free to pursue religious freedom.

The tension between nationalism and religion is not new.

Christ the King Sunday was established in 1925 by the Roman Catholic Church in response to creeping nationalism in Europe. Concerned that the focus of loyalty was shifting from God to government, the Catholic Church changed the theme for the last Sunday before Advent from Judgment Sunday to Christ the King.

Here we are 100 years later, and our national dialogue is tilting toward Christian Nationalism - a dominion focused approach to eliminating religious freedom in favor of nationalizing Christianity. That leaves many of us wondering, what would Christ say? Do we belong to his kingdom or the kingdom of men?

As we pray and preach the Gospel, it's difficult to not feel the tension between our earthly demands - make money, generate a profit at all costs, consume natural resources to supply growing demands for goods and services - and Christ's way- preserve the earth, love one another as he loves us. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the wounded. To whose kingdom do we belong?

Jesus was born to a peasant Jewish family in Palestine. He was not born white with blue eyes and blond hair. His homeland is embroiled in an escalating war between Israel, Palestine, with encroaching presence from Jordan and Iraq. Dominion over territory is key to this growing war. So many wars in our human history were and are being fought over sovereignty and national identity.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is taunted by Pilate who demanded to know whether Jesus thought of himself as "The King of the Jews?"

Jesus didn't answer Pilate's question but said that his kingdom is not of this world. Pilate didn't know how to process Jesus' response and accepted the demand that he be killed. The cross used to crucify Jesus was marked above his head with Hebrew symbols that say "King of the Jews." Jesus' kingdom is with God, not with men. He answers to God, not Pilate or a King

This Sunday is the feast of Christ the King. It was first added to the Christian calendar by Pope Pius XI in 1925, in the bitterly divided aftermath of World War I, when nationalism and fascism were alarmingly ascendant across Europe. He conceived of it as a way to remind Christians that our primary allegiance is not to any earthly ruler or nation, but to Jesus Christ.

Using the word "king" to describe Jesus, or "kingdom" to describe his coming reign, can make us uncomfortable. The word carries a connotation of tyrannical, authoritarian rule, that seems very unlike how Jesus used or described his authority. But Jesus, the New Testament, and the church through the ages knew exactly what they were doing - engaging the subversive act of turning the concepts of king and kingdom on their heads. The point is that Jesus is unlike any and all political and institutional powers

in the world. Instead of privileging one tribe, language, or nation, Jesus builds the Beloved Community gathered around God's feast of love. Instead of making himself big in order to win, Jesus comes to us small and humble. Instead of clinging to his identity with entitlement, Jesus leads by serving. Instead of putting himself first, he lives by dying. That is how the God of all creation presides over the whole cosmos.

The world lost a prominent Christian thinker this week - Tony Campolo - a champion of Red Letter Christianity - which he proposed as an alternative to evangelical definitions of Christianity. The term "red letter" refers to the text in many versions of the New Testament that depict Jesus' words in RED letters. Tony Campolo was a progressive Christian leader who evangelicals considered to be controversial because he kept focusing on caring for the poor. He traveled the country, urging people to let their lives be transformed by Jesus. He focused on Matthew 25, where Jesus makes clear that on Judgement Day, when we meet our maker, the defining question will be how each of us responded to "the least of these."

Campolo was inspired by the writings of John Wesley when he went to seminary at Eastern. He worked with fellow Eastern Alumnus Shane Claiborn to found Red Letter Christians, to help followers of Jesus Christ

remember that there are 2000 verses of scripture that call upon us to respond to the needs of the poor. His early experience at a Baptist church in Philadelphia showed him that Christians can be racist. His father moved his family to a Black Baptist church where they worshipped. After college, he earned a doctorate in Sociology and taught at Eastern University for many years. He will be remembered for inspiring more than 1000 young people to pursue God's call to ministry.

Campolo's life provides a powerful witness to the transformation that can occur when we truly follow the teachings of Jesus.

What does it mean to you to be a Christian? As we find ourselves in a moment when Christian Nationalism—that abomination that equates the dominance of a racially narrow understanding of America with the kingdom of God—is again ascendant, this feast is as important as it has ever been.

. We cannot allow those who would corrupt the gospel of Jesus to steal from us the way that very gospel speaks of the savior. We are invited in these days, and all days, to follow our spiritual ancestors in pointing to Christ the King of peace. We point to that kingdom by sowing God's reckless generosity wherever we go, by meeting the hatred and vitriol all around with God's love,

by standing with those the world's kingdoms constantly push aside, and by walking day by day the way of the cross of Jesus, which alone can bring true life, true liberation, true peace, and true joy.

Let us proclaim Jesus as king loudly, boldly, without apology or fear, and may we tether our lives to God's reign of love and justice, until it is gloriously and finally done, on earth as it is in heaven.

May it be so,

AMEN.