



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Not That Kind of King

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 21, 2021

Christ the King Sunday (Last Sunday after Pentecost)

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18-33-37

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Most Americans don't have much contact with royalty. We're often fascinated by royal families, particularly the House of Windsor in England, and so we follow their marriages, their divorces, their scandals. We watch their weddings and funerals on television.

I was once invited to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace when I attended the Lambeth Conference in 2008. The Lambeth Conference, as some of you may know, is a once-in-about-every-ten-years' event hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury where bishops from the worldwide Anglican Communion are brought together for conversation and consultation. The Garden Party, hosted by Queen Elizabeth and her husband, Prince Philip, was one of the highlights of that two-week conference.

After the bishops finished a long walk across the City of London as a part of a Millennium Development Goals March, and, after lunch at Lambeth Palace, where Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke, they had buses to shuttle us to Buckingham Palace. As instructed, all of the bishops were dressed in purple cassocks and episcopal crosses. (The smarter ones among us were wearing comfortable shoes as well.)

The event took place in the gardens behind Buckingham Palace. So, we entered a gate, walked through a series of ornate rooms, and then out onto a wide, well-manicured lawn. At precisely 4:00 pm, the queen appeared, and, as she stood at attention at the top of a stone stairway, the band played "God Save the Queen." Tea, apple juice (from the Queen's own orchard, I discovered later), sandwiches, and cakes were served and the band played background music (which surprisingly included a couple of well-known Beatles tunes).

Yeoman Warders (better known as Beefeater guardsmen) formed a perimeter around the queen as she moved through the party, while the archbishop's staff invited certain bishops who were politically important to be introduced to the queen. (Now, strangely, the Bishop of Kansas must not have been considered strategically significant, and so I did not have the pleasure of being personally introduced to Her Majesty.) However, several of my friends were introduced to her (or to her husband) and each of them said it was quite mesmerizing. The wife of a fellow bishop, who was a British subject, broke into tears, and even those of us who were a little bit cynical about "all this royal nonsense" found something happening which was both ancient and powerful.

What was interesting to me about the whole experience—and it really was an experience—was how royal preferment, even in the modern era, still possessed influence and authority. Power takes on many different forms, and the kingship we recognize today on Christ the King Sunday is absolutely nothing like the power of a king or a queen.

The importance of days like this one on the Church Calendar (and the importance of the liturgical Church Year) is that it's a way of helping us understand time. Time is important to understand if you're a human being, because every one of us—indeed, every living thing on the planet—has a finite number of days before life comes to an end.

The Christian faith endeavors to tell people what time it is.

- And the Christian faith is repeatedly saying that all time is temporal.
- And the Christian faith is repeatedly saying we are living in the time between Christs.

That is to say, we are alive in the time between the time when Christ was born of a woman, lived and taught among us, suffered, died, and was buried, and then three days later rose again from the grave. We live between that time and the time when we believe Christ will return. And, Christians believe, as the Nicene Creed proclaims, Christ “will come again in glory.” We believe Christ will come again and the reign of God will begin and have no end.

And this earthly existence of ours? The one into which we now put so much planning and energy? That will completely and utterly cease to exist, or, if it continues, it will be completely and utterly extraneous because all of humanity will be bathed in the extraordinary light of the presence of God, Christ the King.

The ways we mark time are important. We begin each week with Sunday, the first day of the week: a day of rest and a day of giving thanks and praise to God for the life we've been given. Then we are invited to give some part of each day over to prayer, perhaps beginning with Morning Prayer and ending in Evening Prayer or Compline. Three times a day at meals we're given the opportunity to thank God for the food we eat and for the sustenance we receive through God's grace.

In the Church Year, Sundays are designed into seasons, and the liturgical year is organized in a way that attempts to teach a variety of important things about God.

- Advent is the period of preparation for the birth of Christ when we focus on waiting and watching and preparing.
- Christmas is a twelve-day season of celebrating God's greatest gift to humanity, Jesus, the Christ.
- Epiphany is a shorter season when we celebrate the incarnational presence of God in the world.
- Lent is the period when we focus on the sacrifice of Christ, and we ask ourselves to become better and more careful stewards of the lives we've been given.
- Holy Week is the intense reenactment of the final days of Jesus and his suffering and death upon a cross on Good Friday.
- Easter Day and the fifty days that follow are the celebration of Christ's triumph over death and the grave.
- Pentecost is the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the reminder that this holy and comforting presence of God is with us always.
- The Season of Pentecost, Ordinary time, the long season, the rest of the calendar is the time when we reflect on the Church's mission in the world.

Throughout the liturgical year, throughout these various seasons and holy days, we're able to focus on a variety of aspects of Christ and the Christian faith. Throughout the Church Year, we are able to focus on Christ's humanity, his humility, his wisdom, his tenderness, his zeal, his sacrifice, and above all his great love. And, on this particular Sunday, we are called to focus on the Cosmic Christ who rules forever.

In today's gospel lesson, we find Jesus standing before Pilate in that moment in which Christ's purpose for coming into the world is made absolutely clear. Jesus says, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." And that truth is that Jesus *is* King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Not an earthly King who may rule as wisely as David or as capriciously as Hezekiah, but a heavenly king who leads by his service to God's people and who rules through the enormity of his sacrifice. This is the paradoxical nature of Christ the King who is not like any other king we have ever known. To be first, he must be last. To rule, he must serve. To be great, he must be lowly. To be high above all, he must be the least of these. To be rich, he must become poor. To have everything, he must hold onto nothing.

"When we consider Jesus' use of the 'kingdom' metaphor, it might be helpful to see this 'kingdom' more in terms of a 'kin-dom,' says theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. Jesus is talking about a new world, a new kinship and way of being in relationship with each other... and with God."ⁱ Jesus is actually talking about a world-wide family that includes virtually everyone.

Pearl Maria Barros notes, "Throughout his ministry and in his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus models for us a different way of leading.

- He engages the outcasts of his society, daring to recognize the presence of God in prostitutes, tax collectors, and widows.
- He chastises his disciples when they start arguing about which one of them is going to sit on his left and on his right—it's not about prestige, guys!
- He heals the sick and welcomes little children. Then he preaches about a kingdom where 'the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.' Not the kind of thing proclaimed by people in power who are interested in keeping their power."ⁱⁱ

When Saint Bernard was once asked to list the four cardinal virtues, he replied, "Humility. Humility. Humility and humility." I think what the old saint was getting at is that the bedrock of the Christian community should be our shared sense of imperfection. The knowledge that we've all been shattered by something should, in fact, bring us all together and bring us all down to earth.

The Church was never intended to be a showcase for the morally gifted! It was always a fellowship of the inadequate who find perfection, not in themselves, but in Christ, their heavenly King. This brokenness is simply an expression of the human condition, a witness to that primordial wound that cuts across all humanity, a chasm which exists within each one of us. Theologically labeled as Original Sin, perhaps it's more helpful to describe it as Paul once tried, as an inability within each of us to do the things we ought to do while avoiding those things we ought not do. It's no small miracle that deeply connected to this fracture in our human nature is God's constant willingness to bridge this gap, to heal this wound, and to love us ANYWAY!

There will always be those who appear to be on the spiritual "high ground" who absolutely miss the point. There will always be, in some of us, the desire to believe we are in a more righteous relationship with God than anyone else could possibly enjoy. The disciples, after all that time they had in the presence of the absolute humility of Christ, still asked him who would sit at his right hand and at his left when he ascended to his heavenly throne. Unbelievable, right?

And there will always be those persons who appear to be beneath us. We think of them as lesser, uneducated, unworthy; and yet it is they who are the surprising and most grateful recipients of God's grace. They are pass-holders to the Kingdom of God, honored and sacred guests of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. They are the ones letting us come along for the ride.

There's an old story about "a king who had no son, and who longed for an heir who would succeed him to the throne. So he decided to post a notice, inviting young men to apply to be considered for adoption into

his family and to become his heir. All that he asked of the applicants was that they should love God and their neighbor.

“A poor peasant boy saw the notice but thought he would have absolutely no chance of becoming adopted by the king because of the ragged clothes he wore. So he worked very hard until he had just enough money to buy a new set of clothes. Wearing his new clothes, he set off to the royal palace, determined to apply for the position of the king’s adopted son. But as he approached the palace, the boy encountered a poor beggar on the road. The old man was shivering with cold, and the boy felt sorry for him. So he exchanged his clothes with him.

“Now he was back to wearing beggar’s clothes himself, and so it hardly seemed worthwhile to go on towards the king’s palace. However, having come so far already, the boy decided to keep traveling, and at least he would be able to glimpse the great palace from the outside.

“When he arrived, he was greeted by scornful laughter and by snide remarks by the king’s courtiers. Nevertheless, he was finally able to gain admittance into the presence of the king. It was very odd but there was something strangely familiar about the king. At first, the boy couldn’t figure out what it was and why he felt so at home in the King’s presence. Then he realized that the king himself was wearing the clothes that he had given to the old beggar only a few hours ago along the road. The king stood up, came down from his throne, and embraced the boy, holding him tightly in his arms. ‘At last, you are home’ he whispered. ‘Welcome home my son. Welcome home.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

We, too, are welcomed home by a surprising king. And we, too, can come to appreciate in Christ a King unlike *any* other, before him or since.

Amen.

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ⁱ Pearl Maria Barros, *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, Year B, Proper 29, November 22, 2009, p. 4