

Sermon Notes

Christ the King Sunday

Year C

November 21st, 2010

Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

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Rector

Yesterday, Fr. Michael Lapsley, visited Church of Our Saviour. He is a priest from South Africa who now travels the world leading a ministry of reconciliation for peoples and nations who have experience trauma, and he joined us as part of a wider diocesan conversation that is just getting under way. He spoke of his experiences as a New Zealander sent to South Africa by his religious order in the midst of the Apartheid era, and the horror he felt when he first saw the dehumanization Apartheid brought to people's lives and souls. . . and to visages of an upside-down moral universe. Most shocking to him and vivid in his memory was young black school children being shot on the streets in broad daylight – and then the hideous recognition that the perpetrators would, with impunity, go to church the following Sunday, convinced of their own rectitude before God.

Fr. Michael reflects on the upside-down nature of history, shared and individual, that haunts each of us – whether it's violence in our ancestral heritage or the deep pains and abuses we have encountered in our own lives. What he saw in Apartheid was so profoundly evil, he was moved to speak out against it wherever and whenever he could. He ultimately became such a perceived threat that he received a letter bomb one day: one that took his hands, one of his eyes, and much of his hearing.

His body took on the profound questions that we must all face sooner or later:

When the world is upside-down, where do we begin to heal, to re-build, to reframe the houses of our reality?

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Today is "Christ the King" Sunday, the last of the church year. It's one of the latest Sundays to appear on the Christian calendar, instituted in the Roman Catholic calendar in 1925 as a Christian antidote the emerging fascism in Italy under Mussolini, and then later adopted by a wide variety of Christian denominations. It's a title, though, that is inclined to make us a little uncomfortable at times, especially in America. Kings were done away by our nascent democracy during the American Revolution, weren't they?

When we peel back all the layers of our Christian heritage, we come across a core handful of declarations of faith from the earliest days of Christianity, even before the gospels as we have them were penned, Paul's letters were written and sent. Two of those declarations, along with our central sacramental acts of baptism and communion, have survived the test of time:

Christ is risen

and

Jesus is Lord.

It's the "Jesus is Lord" that we are reminded of today, which again remains odd. "Lord" smacks to so many of us in our cultural context of feudalism, perhaps of indolent aristocracy – something that belongs best in a bygone age or in fantasy novels or historical fiction like that of Ken Follett. Not in the 21st century. For this reason, it's a bit odd that Christianity retains this language – we even have it in our baptismal covenant, ancient as it is – particularly in the American context. . . especially here in the far West where we have such a high premium on individual freedom and a very low threshold of tolerance when it comes to the discomfiting words like "allegiance" and "obedience" that lordship seems to demand of us. For our early Christian ancestors, to say Jesus is Lord was patently dangerous. It meant for them, of course, that Caesar is not. The Romans, history tells us, caught onto that pretty quickly.

Even in our age, "Jesus is Lord" haunts us as Christians. It reminds us that our wealth is not Lord, nor our President, nor is the bottom line. . . and this is the hardest for all of us: nor is our quest for self-determination, the quixotic pursuit to defeat our innate vulnerability.

And there's another reason "Christ the King," is problematic for everyone, probably in every age. The only thing that ultimately ended the on-again, off-again persecutions that marked early Christianity was an eventual co-opting of Christ for Empire, a royal attempt – if you will – to turn the moral universe upside down yet again. We've been wrestling with the consequences of that ever since, through schisms and reformations. But even if we look deeply at our scriptural heritage, Kings have a colorful history not only in Western history, but going back to our spiritual roots. It was only with great hesitation and many warnings that God, through the prophet Samuel, granted ancient Israel a king. The People of God wanted a king like every other people around them. Yes, they got some true shepherds like David and Solomon, but the list is much longer of corrupt and inept self-serving monarchs with little regard for the people, and even less regard for the God who ostensibly raised up their lineage. Even David and Solomon were far from perfect rulers, easily swayed by their own lusts and ambitions, their military might have been a lucky draw historically, and their power was fleeting, fragile, and easily corrupted.

Our tradition, infamously, has another self-serving king at a great turning point. Henry VIII is really like that abusive great uncle of the family that we'd all rather not discuss in detail. While we might credit his daughter, Elizabeth, with the establishment of classical Anglicanism; but it was Henry VIII who separated us from Rome and had no small part to play in bringing the right people together, like Thomas Cranmer, who authored the first Book of Common Prayer. We get a package deal, though. In the room with us is Henry VIII's intemperate ambitions for a son, the blood of his wives, the memory even in our contemporary spiritual landscape of a moral world turned upside down for the umpteenth time. And yet it is in that world, our heritage was, in part, birthed.

So why on earth must we refer to Christ as "King?" Do we really want a king millennia after David when we have only a handful of examples of monarchs that were truly decent human beings, who were undoubtedly faithfully practicing Christians? Do we risk projecting onto Jesus our worst corporate memories of kingship, of patriarchal domination, of abusive, corrupt power, of sparking a rebellion in our pews that will send many of us rushing to the doors?

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Today's Gospel is not about Jesus on a throne, or even discussions of Christ on a royal throne seated in glory – yes these can be found in the pages of our sacred text. Nor do we get the reminder, as we will in a few scarce weeks (Christmas is coming!) of Jesus' royal lineage, Luke's eloquent portrayal of a long blood line all the way back to David. Rather, our gospel today is of Jesus on the cross speaking with a thief. The moral universe is turned upside-down. God is nailed to a tree, the companion of criminals and pariahs, and, if we remember, the friend of tax collectors, prostitutes, and other societal sinners of his day.

Fr. Michael talks about lying in hospital after the bombing, being uncertain whether it was better to live or die. Only days before the bombing, he had spoken at a school, and the children who had met him heard that he was in hospital, another victim of the violence of a dying regime and its upside-down morality. As an act of solidarity with Fr. Michael, they sent paintings and artwork, which filled his hospital room. In his worst moments of despair, the presence of the art so lovingly sent him by concerned children gave him the courage to go on living, and offered him the reminder that he was loved and watched over. He recovered, and he went on to help build a process by which victims and perpetrators come together across the world to reclaim their common humanity and rebuild community.

Fr. Michael talks about how it is not enough to survive, which is often the low bar that we set for ourselves when we are victimized. It is the goal of healing to ultimately become *victors*, to overcome the disability of our wounds and allow God to transform them into a gift for the world. Fr. Michael's prostheses are now like the wounds of Christ for him and to all he bears Gospel witness. It's astonishing that in conversation with Fr. Michael, the bombing for him is now sewn into a much wider, richer tapestry of his life walking with God. And, as he notes, he never fired a gun against Apartheid – the bomb took away his hands, some of his sight, damaged his hearing. But his greatest gift and weapon – if you will – against Apartheid was left unscathed: his tongue. And he still uses it to pray in healing in the face of hideous injustice and broken humanity all over the world.

Our gospel today reminds us that Christ is King not because he rules from a throne, or a gilded hall, or a great castle in the sky or otherwise. Christ is King, because he rules from the cross and, then, the empty tomb. Christ is King because he is victorious over death and even the death our own thievery brings and the way we so easily as a human family turn the moral world upside-down. Christ is King to unseat every power that attempts to victimize and dominate, Christ is King when we are crucified by the world for simply becoming the gift of hope and peace God intends us to be. Christ is King when we are down and out on our luck, suffering under the weight of our own crosses inflicted on us by our misdeeds and those of others. Christ is King when we are looking straight into the face of our own failures and even death itself. And it is not enough for God that Christ will remember us when we are gone. The thief asks Jesus only to remember him in his Kingdom. Jesus responds with much more than he asked for or imagined, "Today," he tells him, "you will be with me in paradise."

And that means we have a King who out-does all monarchs and every other ruler of our hearts in love, mercy, and compassion. Who brings life. Who offers himself for our freedom. Who gives good news where we have only heard bad. And that to me is worth celebrating, worth keeping this odd, ancient name of Christ the King, for it serves to remind us that Jesus is Lord not yesterday nor just today, but for every tomorrow, every new beginning, every age, until all our wounds his healed and all of creation is wrapped up in God's abundant love, and we worship never again out of fear, but out of thanksgiving forever.