

Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan

In the Name of Christ, King of Glory, Prince of Peace. Amen.

Kingship can be puzzling for 21st century people like us to deal with. Some wish to simply ignore it and to skip the Christ the King title of today's service, since it is after all a very modern addition to our calendar. But we have no choice, no way to avoid the King idea as we obey last week's call to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the words of our Scriptures which are full of kings, good and bad, real and rhetorical. Jesus spoke of kings, called himself a king. There are kings throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Christian Scriptures and on into our hymnody. So it is an idea and an image of the divine that we need to contend with. We need to consider what we mean, as the Church and as individuals, when we give Christ the title 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.

For us the most common place to encounter kings in is fairytales, those stories of childhood that comfort or frighten, and teach assorted morals. But for us kings are not part of life, not part of the structure of our societies. Kings do not fit into a world that asserts the fundamental equality of all humans, however much trouble we have living up to that assertion. Even those of us who admired the faithful service of Her Late Majesty Elizabeth are hard pressed to find a justification for specific families having exceptional wealth, power, prestige, control, and responsibility based solely on their lineage. It is an ancient idea that no longer fits in our world. And in fact there are very few royals left, so we do not have many monarchs to give flesh to this image of who Christ is to us.

But we cannot abandon the image altogether unless we cease to read Scripture or the texts of our own specific traditions. So we need to make it our own, in ways that divine kingship makes sense even if human kingship is something we feel humanity has grown beyond.

Much fabulous music and poetry has been inspired by this theme, which still stirs our hearts and souls. I can scarcely hear 'King of kings and Lord of lords' without the music of Handel echoing gloriously in my ears. Much poetry written on this theme has found its way into our hymnal, as you will see in the Christ the King handout after the service, each poem a different reflection about this idea.

I know that today's gospel reading surprised the Bible Study group. Year C of the lectionary ends with Jesus on the Cross where the authorities have mockingly labeled him 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. We see our King 'high and lifted up', arms open in blessing and welcome, promising paradise to the criminal at his side, absorbing all our human violence and rejection, returning only love and forgiveness. This is an unconventional King. This is the image we need to hold in our hearts and minds when we use the title.

As I looked at the calendar of observances clustering on these days around Christ the King Sunday I found two that I thought might help us think about the fundamental idea of Christ as King. One is from nearly a millennium ago, when the world was very much ruled by kings and queens and one from our own emphatically kingless country in the last century. First Queen Margaret of Scotland and then James Otis Sargent Huntington.

Margaret was a queen in her own right and Father Huntington an American man of inherited privilege, but both of them listened first to the calling of Christ, despite the practices of dominion and privilege they were born into. Both took very seriously the images of Christ the King on the cross and Christ on his throne saying to the people, "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me." - both images of kingship expressed in service born of love.

Both of these saints fed the hungry, in body and spirit; gave drink to the thirsty; welcomed the stranger; clothed the naked; visited the sick and imprisoned, regardless of whether this seemed unreasonable to their peers. Christ was their King and Christ's dominion was the only structure of the authority which truly mattered to them.

After Margaret and her brother, mother, and sister were driven out of England by William the Conqueror, a storm at sea prevented them from reaching promised refuge on the continent and they came aground in Scotland. King Malcolm offered the family refuge at his court and eventually Margaret and Malcolm married. She brought the more sophisticated customs of the continent to their court, and taught Malcolm to read and to pray. The new queen missed daily worship in the lovely European chapels, but not wishing to disrupt others' lives, she went out each day to pray alone in the nearby forest. Malcontents whispered to the king that his wife might be secretly meeting foreign spies, so one day the King followed her into the forest and was highly embarrassed to find her not hatching treasonous plots, but deep in prayer. Margaret also challenged her husband to be a true king by truly understanding the needs of his people.

At her urging the two went out into the villages where they saw the poverty and struggles of the people, as well as the efforts of faithful monks and priests to care for them in buildings that were falling down around them. Margaret oversaw the building and rebuilding of many churches, and the support of their ministries. She personally saw to the feeding of countless poor at the castle, tended the sick, and even personally wove wool from the royal sheep into cloth to provide warmth. Margaret's very public life of charity grew out of her private life of prayer and devotion to her own true King, Jesus the Christ. Prayer was the heart of her life and her relationship to Christ, and submission to his command of love determined all that she did. She remains for many the model of the generous and responsible use of power and wealth, and of contagious faith. She was a queen who accepted the supreme authority of the King of kings, and modeled her life and the lives of her family and court after the King on the cross.

Much more recently, James Otis Sargent Huntington, the Father Founder of the Order of the Holy Cross, was the product of excellent schooling culminating at Harvard, and could easily have taken his place in society as a man of power and dominion. But he found himself called to begin a monastic order in service to the poor and needy and spiritually hungry of New York City. For 50 years he gave himself completely to the love and service of God and his fellow human beings.

Out of his mission, which sometimes left him in great loneliness and discouragement, have arisen monasteries and schools across our continent and in Liberia. In his centennial history of the Order of the Holy Cross, my seminary classmate, Brother Adam McCoy, writes, "Who can tell what the energies of holiness can do? This is the power God has unleashed in the world through James Otis Sargent Huntington and the Order of the Holy Cross. A hundred years of faithfulness, prayer, service. . . . A hundred years of waiting, waiting for the Word out of Silence. And when the Word speaks, it is of love, of life, and of the future": He then quotes Father Huntington's words in the Rule of the Order: "Holiness is the brightness of divine love, and love is never idle; it must accomplish great things. Love must act, as light must shine and fire must burn."

These two very different saintly people stand as examples to all of us who come after, in our efforts to live out our own relationships with Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. In Jeremiah, we heard God speaking of searching out the lost sheep, promising to feed them and care for them, binding up wounds, giving strength and protection to all. Much of the courage and confidence of the great servants of humanity come from their knowledge that God who has dominion over all creation is looking after them. Neither Queen Margaret nor Father Huntington felt entirely alone or hopeless, because they could look up to the face of Christ on the Cross and on the throne and see in him the King who called them into service and the Shepherd who would care for them to the end, the King who submitted to a horrible, painful death by torture, and in the midst of it promised paradise to his fellow sufferers.

What of us? Few of us are as prominent or privileged as Margaret or Father Huntington, but looking at their lives gives us a sense of the unexpected calls from God, which are always calls to serve God by serving others, often in quite unanticipated places or ways. We are reminded that those around us may not understand or support what we feel called to do and that we will not know what kind of success our efforts may yield, but that our King will always be with us to guard us and to guide us, requiring only that we are faithful in our devotion to him and the path he sets before us. To accept Jesus as King, means to accept Love as the end and meaning of life, as the central focus of all that we think or do. And (quoting Father Huntington again) "Love is never idle; it must accomplish great things. Love must act, as light must shine and fire must burn."

And so we act out the love of Christ in the world, as faithful subjects of the King of Love.

Amen