

A few minutes ago, I explained to our youngest members that today is the last day of the church year. Next week we begin again the cycle that will take us through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. The history of this Sunday is interesting. For a long time, it was referred to as “Judgment Sunday,” calling to mind the second coming of Christ and the end of time. In fact, it wasn’t until 1925 that Pope Pius XI decided that the name should be changed and other church bodies followed suit.

Think about what you remember about this time period from your history classes or Hollywood historical drama. What was going on in the world, particularly in Europe?

In 1925 Europe is almost exactly between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. Nationalism was on the move in Europe. Benito Mussolini was amassing power in Italy. Two years earlier, Adolf Hitler attempted a coup and his Nazi political party was gaining popularity and influence. What was the message that seemed to be so appealing to the beaten, war-weary people of Europe?

It was a message that was rooted in a nationalist identity, one that blamed others, blamed outsiders, blamed people who were different for the ills facing the so-called “normal” people. And it was a message that declared there was salvation and a way forward could be found in only one place—or rather, in only one person. It was a message that focused on the power of humans and downplayed or downright ignored the role of God in human history.

As Pope Pius was watching this unfold he decided to make a statement. In his encyclical *Quas Primas*, he introduced “Christ the King Sunday” as a response. There is a lot in this encyclical, but boiled down it proclaims that if we *say* that Christ is King, as our scriptures do, then Christ should be King over our whole being. Christ should reign over our bodies, minds, and hearts, and our faith should be in *God*, not in our national identity or in any mortal power.

This is a message we continually need to hear because we are continually tempted to put our faith in ourselves or in other human authority. We might come to church on this Sunday and nod our heads and say, “Yes, of *course*, Christ is King!” ...but it’s one thing to say it. It’s another thing to *feel* it. It’s another thing to *live* like it’s true. It’s another thing even just to know *why*, exactly, it matters to us.

Christ being king, Christ reigning over us matters to us because of the *kind* of ruler Christ ends up being. In just about every way, Jesus embodied everything that kings and rulers are *not*.

Jesus was poor. He grew up as a member of the lower class. He lived in occupied territory under the thumb of an oppressive regime. He traveled from place to place and, in his own words, had no place to lay his head. He relied on other people for food and shelter and by all indications had no worldly possession to his name.

Jesus was loving and generous to people who were considered outcasts. He regularly ate with people other would avoid, like tax collectors. He cared more about the people forgotten by society than the people who were well-off and well-settled. He sought out the powerless and didn't care if he had the favor of the powerful.

Jesus was peaceful. He called for his disciples to pray for those who persecuted them. He told them to offer up their other cheek if they were hit. When Peter drew his sword at the end of Jesus' life, he tells him, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." He called for justice and righteousness and peace among people.

But even still, Jesus was *passionate*. He was not some milquetoast Messiah who never raised his voice and never took people to task. He wasn't afraid to call out the Pharisees for their unfair practices. He didn't back down when facing Pilate's interrogation. He even got angry. He flipped over tables and made a whip out of cords in the temple to drive out people taking advantage in the temple.

He was all of these things. All him *being* all of these things angered people. That's why we get to the Gospel reading for this morning. He didn't fit the mold of what a king *should* be...and so we killed him. He wasn't like the kings of the ancient Israelites because he wasn't a military leader. He wasn't prepared to remove the Romans by force. He wasn't any king the *Romans* would recognize because he didn't amass power by suppressing others.

Even as Jesus is being crucified, most people do not understand who and what he is. The inscription over him says "King of the Jews," but it is a mockery, not a sincere claim. They are laughing at their own clever joke, because how in the world could a *king* be killed in such a way? It is one of the criminals next to Jesus who recognizes his authority. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I want to make something clear about what crucifixion is. First of all, it was not an unusual method of execution. It was used with some regularity by the Roman Empire. Jesus and the criminals killed on either side of him were not the only three to experience it.

Also, crucifixion was not just about killing someone. It was not just about taking someone's life—it was about humiliating someone and torturing them. People died from suffocation, once they got to the point where their arms could no longer hold themselves up. The cross as mode of death was a particular favorite for individuals who were considered lower class but had tried to rebel against the Empire. The thought was that these people had tried to rise above their station, had tried to lift themselves above their betters...so if that's what they wanted, the Romans would do that for them. "They want to be lifted up? Oh, we'll *lift them up*." And they were, and often left on display for days or weeks as a public warning about what happens when you defy Rome.

In fact, the cross was so horrifying a symbol that it took Christians until over a hundred years after Jesus' death for it to be used as a widespread symbol. We've sanitized it now, but for a Jesus-follower two thousand years ago, it would be like worshipping with an electric chair or guillotine in front of us.

But *our king* is crucified. Our king is unexpected. Our messiah, our savior, our sovereign is, by all accounts, a criminal executed by the state...and that doesn't sound terribly kingly to most people. But we didn't need God to come into our world as the king the world expected...We needed God to come into the world as the king that is so *desperately* essential.

We need a ruler who leads with abundant love instead of only caring about those who are deemed "worthy." We need a ruler who relentlessly pursues peace and justice instead of vengeance and looking out for number one. We need a ruler who is generous instead of one who either hoards or squanders resources.

And this is what we have: not in any mortal in power or in control anywhere in our world...but in our incredible God whose sovereignty is not limited by national boundaries, ethnic identities or cultural differences.

When we look around and wonder where our trust belongs, it is in the one who has claimed us and named us in baptism. It is the one who feeds us with his very body and blood at this table. It is in the one who forgives us and loves us unconditionally. This is our king. This is our God.

Amen.