

Proper 29, Year C, 2010
Luke 23:33-43
Last Sunday after Pentecost
(Christ the King)
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today is the Last Sunday in the Season after Pentecost, a Sunday also known, in many churches, as the Feast Day of Christ the King. Why do we honor Christ as the King? It is because for most of our two thousand plus years as a church we have understood the Lord not to be a king but *the* King. To be a king is to rule supreme, and we consider Jesus as King of the universe. The biblical witness tells us that Jesus also understood himself as the King, which is somewhat strange, and his self-witness this way is certainly not consistent in the Gospels, but the Gospels tell us that as the Son of God, Jesus was monarch of a kingdom of the redeemed, people set apart as reckoned righteous by God. These set-apart people constitute the royal family of God. That royal family is us, about as un-blue blooded as a group can get. But we are made a royal family by the one who died for our salvation. We are baptized into his death and his resurrection and therefore set apart as righteous, fully included in the Kingdom of God as citizens of the Kingdom of God and as brothers and sisters of Jesus, the King himself.

We also understand God the Father as King – and also King of the Universe, for that matter. The two images get rolled together and usually confused. I'm not sure how to sort them. I'm not sure that we have to sort them, certainly since none of us really understand this concept of Christ as King to begin with. We can't be talking about anything like earthly kings, because even the best of earthly kings are prone at a minimum to arrogance and greed totally absent in Jesus.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea at the time that Jesus was crucified, heard all this talk of kingship and became very concerned. When Jesus stood before Pilate, Pilate asked him, "Are you a king?" My kingdom, Jesus said, is not of this world. I think that this is the source of our confusion, because we want to understand kings in terms of this world. Jesus is a king of hearts, a king of souls, a king of minds. He doesn't so much rule us as love us. What a strange way for a king to rule: no compulsion, no armies, no police, no power other than the absolute power of love.

Pilate didn't understand this. When you think about it, you realize that we bring as much baggage to Jesus as Pilate did. When we talk of Jesus as judge, we introduce the anxiety factor, but of what is there to be anxious, when Jesus loves us and wishes only our wellbeing and our salvation. When we think of kingly power, we introduce compulsion, but in our relationship with Christ, the only compulsion is a love. When we think of kingly authority, we think of the power of the state over its subjects, but Jesus has no stately power, no armies and no police. Christ's power is the power of righteousness, of ultimate good, of ultimate justice and ultimate mercy.

To me the most powerful symbol of Christ as King is a type of crucifix, seen in some churches and some paintings, known as a *Christus Rex*. It has a risen Christ on the Cross, sometimes crowned with a royal crown, always garbed in Eucharistic vestments. It is strange art, but it is powerfully beautiful art, and it tells us that Christ the King is the Risen King, that he is Lord over a people raised in his love and that he rules through the Cross of Death which is truly the Cross of Life, the Cross of Love. *Amen.*