

The Festival of Christ the King: Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 19-20, 2016

Luke 23:27-43

“The Crown”

With the super-charged political environment here at home, lately my wife and I have found refuge in politics from another era and in another nation. We’ve taken to watching the made-for-Netflix television series, “The Crown.” The series is a biographical story chronicling the early years of Queen Elizabeth II as she began her reign. Although not a blockbuster with record-breaking numbers of viewers, we’ve really enjoyed watching it. A particular episode begins with young Elizabeth as a girl practicing with her father, George VI, for his coronation in May 1937. The crown he will wear is fashioned of gold and precious gems. As he places this on his head, the attendant tells him the crown’s precise weight (five pounds), to which the king adds: “Not to mention its symbolic weight.” As he looks at himself in the mirror at Buckingham Palace with the royal crown on his head, the king says to himself, “There’s a sight I hoped I’d never see.” When his older brother, Edward VIII, abdicated the throne to marry the American socialite, Wallace Warfield Simpson, he reluctantly but dutifully assumed the role as England’s next king. Fast forward sixteen years to 1953 when Elizabeth, now married with two young children, is herself practicing for her own coronation. As she walks around with the same 5-pound crown atop her head, she tells her children: “It’s not as easy as it looks.” To which the attendant replies, “That’s exactly what the king [your father] said.” Seeing herself in the mirror with the crown upon her own head now, Elizabeth says to the attendant, “Do you suppose I could borrow it [the crown] for a few days, just to practice?” And he wisely says: “Alright, ma’am, but from whom [will you borrow it]? If it’s not yours, whose is it?” If there is a king or a queen, surely there must also be a crown. It is that image of a crown that I would hold before us on this final Sunday of the church year, the festival of Christ the King. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

[As we approach the end of the church year, it’s good to know the origins of this Festival of Christ the King. Doing a little research, I discovered that in the calendar for the 1941 *The Lutheran Hymnal*, this day is not even mentioned. It appears in the 1977 *Lutheran Book of Worship’s* calendar as “Christ the King, the Last Sunday after Pentecost.” The 1982 *Lutheran Worship* lists this day as “The Sunday of the Fulfillment, the Last Sunday after Pentecost,” and the most recent LCMS hymnal *Lutheran Service Book* (2007) simply puts this as “The Last Sunday of the Church Year.” So, what do we call this day that closes out the church year? The origins of this festival are less than 100 years old, and can be traced to a 1925 encyclical, *Quas Primas*, by Pius XI (1857-1939), in which he states: “While the church had always celebrated images of Christ as King, in the face of the rise of Mussolini, the growing popularity of the Nazi party, and [the excesses of the 1920s that would lead to] the Great Depression, Pius XI in proclaiming this feast asserts that despite the godlessness of the modern world and the widespread notion that religion was now a ‘private affair,’ nevertheless Jesus Christ is Lord of the world... While nations insult the beloved name of our Redeemer by suppressing all mention of it in their conferences and parliaments, we must all the more loudly proclaim his kingly dignity and power, all the more universally affirms his rights... Nations will be reminded by the annual celebration of this feast that not only private individuals but also rulers and princes are bound to give public honor and obedience to Christ. It will call to their minds the thought of the last judgment, wherein Christ who has been cast out of public life, despised, neglected and ignored, will most severely avenge these insults; for his kingly dignity demands that the State should take account of the commandments of God and of Christian principles, both in making laws and in administering justice, and also in providing for the young a sound moral education” (*For All the Saints: A Prayer Book for and by the Church, Vol. IV*, New York: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1996; pp. 1269-1270).]

The founding of our own nation is based on rejection of a royal ruler and the crown he or she might wear, and yet here we are, talking about this very thing. Strange, isn’t it? Our understanding of Jesus’ kingship, our theology of the cross, is rooted in the crown he wore – not of gold or precious gems, but of thorns. It is ironic to note that Luke’s account of Jesus’ suffering and death does not mention the crown of thorns. The other three Gospel writers do include this (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20; John 19:1-5), but for whatever reason, Luke does not. And yet even without this, Jesus is King. Even the mocking inscription placed over him on the cross, meant as a scornful insult, proclaims God’s own truth: **“This is the King of the Jews”** (Luke 23:38).

It’s important to remember that what we hear in today’s Gospel lesson is the last public appearance of Jesus to the world: his crucifixion. His resurrection from the dead, his post-resurrection appearances, his ascension into heaven – all of these were not seen by the world at large, but only by his disciples and followers. Not so when he comes again! And that is

what this festival proclaims. When Christ shall come again, he will be seen by all the world, no longer in his state of humiliation condemned as a criminal and hanging on the cross to suffer and die. No, when Christ shall come again he will be fully revealed for all to see in his state of exaltation in all his heavenly glory and splendor. What had been masked under earthly forms of flesh and blood will give way to that glorious promise of Scripture: **“that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heave and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Philippians 2:10-11). Paul paints a picture of Christ our King in that Epistle reading appointed for this final Sunday of the church year (Colossians 1:13-20): **“He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross”** (Colossians 1:15-20).

At the time when Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, a small congregation of believers in Asia Minor, the power of Rome – the iron fist of Rome – was supreme around the entire Mediterranean world. And yet Paul encourages these early believers, and us as well who live in a different age and under a different power, to never lose sight of an even higher power: the cosmic rule and power of Christ our King, “who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true” (Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, *Luther’s Small Catechism*).

It is readily apparent following the recent elections that there is a fair amount of idolatry on both sides of the political spectrum. In the midst of so many words, so many political hopes and aspirations, so many fears and frustrations, we would do well to hear the words of Christ our King: **“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”** (Mark 13:31). The British author, humorist, and Christian apologist, G.K. Chesterton, wrote in *The Everlasting Man* (1925): “The civilization of antiquity was the whole world; and men no more dreamed of its ending than of the ending of daylight. They could not imagine another order unless it were in another world. The civilization of the world has passed away and those words have not passed. In the long night of the Dark Ages feudalism was so familiar a thing that no man could imagine himself without a lord; and religious was so woven into that network that no man would have believed they could be torn asunder. Feudalism itself was torn to rags and rotted away in the popular life of the Middle Ages; and the first and freshest power in that new freedom was the old religion. Feudalism had passed away, and the words did not pass away. The whole medieval order, in many ways so complete and almost cosmic a home for man, wore out gradually in its turn; and here at last it was thought that the words would die. They went forth across the radiant abyss of the Renaissance and in fifty years were using all its light and learning for new religious foundations, new apologetics, new saints. It was supposed to have been withered up at last in the dry light of the Age of Reason; it was supposed to have disappeared ultimately in the earthquake of the Age of Revolution. Science explained it away; and it was still there. History disinterred it in the past; and it appeared suddenly in the future. Today it stand once more in our path; and even as we watch it, it grows” (taken from “The Everlasting Man,” as found in *For All the Saints: A Prayer Book for and by the Church, Vol. II*, New York: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1996; p. 789). Whatever the political future may hold in this Post-Modern era and beyond, let us hold fast to Christ our King and his promise: **“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”** (Mark 13:31).

Even if Luke didn’t record that Jesus wore that crown of thorns, we know that He did. And because He wore that crown of thorns, giving his life upon the tree of the cross for us and for our salvation, we have the assurance that through faith in him we shall wear the crown of life (Revelation 2:10). The prayer of the penitent thief on the cross beside Jesus is our own prayer: **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”** (Luke 23:42). And as Jesus spoke to that thief, so He speaks to us that same promise: **“Today you will be with me in paradise”** (Luke 23:43). And so we pray with the whole Church: Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Come quickly, Christ our King. Amen.