

Christ Is King!

Psalm 46; Luke 23:32-43

What's coming up this week? Thanksgiving—and the Macy's Day Parade. And you know what else—in the city, in all the big stores, at the South Street Seaport, and out in the malls, Santa Claus will once again be king, sitting on his throne. His kingdom is a world of merchandise—and if we're honest, also of desperation and debt, and disappointment on Dec 26.

And for the next month, the cathedrals of shopping are going to be packed with worshippers. You'll hardly find a place to stand if you go to see the big tree all lit up in the heart of Rockefeller Center. And in fact, it *is* beautiful, and since we're being honest, we all love these things about Christmas, too, and really there's nothing intrinsically wrong in that.

But today reminds us that it's *the way the story ends* that gives the beginning its meaning. Today is the day when Christians proclaim that Christ is lord of the universe, *pantokrator*, Almighty, in Greek—you see him on your bulletin cover, in a mosaic high above the high altar in the apse of the Byzantine Cathedral of Cefalù in Sicily, arms outstretched—but he's offering something to us, and what is that? He's offering us the Word of God.

For today is the day we proclaim that Jesus is much more in our lives than a cute little baby, but the One who stretched out his arms on the cross to embrace the whole sad, painful, weary world, the One who is to be first in our lives and our allegiances. It's a bold claim, but to say, "Jesus is Lord" is to say...well, in the early church, it meant, "Caesar is not lord," and for the people who began in the mid-twentieth century to celebrate this as the Feast of Christ the King, it meant, "Hitler is not lord," and for us it means, "the dismal economy is not lord, our job is not lord, our family is not lord, even our own beloved children are not lord, in fact, our country is not lord, our church building is not lord, our beloved former pastor is not lord, our old friend who has deserted us for another church is not lord, our glorious past is not lord, *our fears for the future* are not lord..." *All things* are under Jesus' feet, you see, and Jesus, who rose from the dead, is Lord of all Creation and of all time and space. He's got *the whole world*, you see, in his hands! He died and rose from the dead and lives eternally, so *what is there to fear?*

Remember the only question a Presbyterian session is required to ask each new member: "Who is your lord and savior?" And the answer is: "Jesus Christ is my lord and savior." To respond in that way is to stand by the claim that the church makes throughout the ages: it's a statement of absolute trust, in which we say that, as Christians, we are pledged to Christ *before anything else*, even this beautiful building, even our wonderful music, even our old friends and our fondest memories.

To say, "Christ is King!" is to say that what Jesus stands for is what we stand for, that his values are our values, that his priorities are our priorities. To say, "Christ is King!" is to say that we choose his life as an example of how we intend to live; how we order our lives; and how we treat other people.

That's what those buttons and bumper stickers are all about: "WWJD?" "What would Jesus do?" Are you having trouble with somebody at work? A family member? A financial decision (it *is* the stewardship season!)? You ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" and sometimes, don't you, you get there by going through the things *you* are thinking of, but that you know Jesus *wouldn't* do. And it's all in the Scriptures, if we open them and read them.

The most obvious thing that Jesus *doesn't* do is try to manipulate things or people, use his power to save himself, point an accusing finger at anyone, even when every accusing finger is pointed at him. "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and us!" they say. But for Jesus, and for Christians down through the centuries, *the cross is the throne of glory, the throne of grace.*

Hanging there on the cross, "the emblem of suffering and shame," Jesus embodies not royal prerogative but weakness and failure. If the crowd were alive today, they'd call him a *loser*, not a winner. And what does he do? Does he use his fully-divine power and might to prove himself right, to prove the crowd wrong? *Before anything else, says Luke, he forgives them.* No blame, just forgiveness, and encouragement, and to the person who reaches out to him, a simple statement of reality: "today you will be with me in Paradise."

Rabbi Edwin Friedman used to say that if you want to emerge a leader, your task is to *describe reality accurately, without looking for someone, or something, to blame.* Have you ever tried to do that? I encourage all of us to try. It's harder than it looks. Not to assign blame, not even to say something like, "we're all at fault, so no one person is at fault" ...because that is still assigning blame.

If we do try to do this, we find ourselves asking questions like "Where are we now?" and "Where is God leading us into the future?" Not any human being, but God? Where is God leading all of us, calling us out of our shells and our old wounds and our comfortable ruts? Those are the questions when Christ is King—because if Christ is Lord, then all that shame and blame become...irrelevant, beside the point, and it is our glorious task to discern where *God* is leading *all* of us.

So we're being honest today. Here is reality. There have been people who have left churches all around here and are now going to Fourth Avenue Church. They have gone there from Bay Ridge United, from Trinity 46th Street, as well as our own, and they are all people over fifty—most of them, over seventy—who have been members of one church or another in our area for many years, mostly many decades. I have talked to David Aja-Sigmon, the pastor of that church, and he tells me that they all say, "this is like the church we remember back in the Good Old Days." And yes, they have a big, sit-down coffee hour that goes on for about an hour and a half. And yes, their pastor is a man, married, with children.

And yes, I happen to know that what he has seen fit to tell me isn't all they're saying to him and others, but that's part of the trouble with churches nowadays—we have forgotten how to tell the truth in love. Instead, we murmur, and as our lives in the harsh world out there are so filled with fear and blame, so we bring fear and blame into our Christian fellowship: all that anxiety, looking for a place to land, and we cut off from one another instead of hanging in there just the way God made us, *with* our differences. And since I now know that all, or almost all, of you have been talking about this but have not wanted to talk to the pastor directly, I am now talking to all of you, directly, all at once, and I'm going to stick to my script as much as I can and have copies of this for you later, so there's no lack of clarity about what the pastor said.

Let's be leaders, shall we? Let's keep on trying to describe reality as accurately as we can without assigning blame. Do we want to be a shrine to the past, or do we want to be the Body of Christ God is calling us to be?

Well, I had a look at our annual reports. That's right, I love you so much, I even did statistical analysis—I even did *math!* What were the Good Old Days of Union Church? I think

that in memory, anyway, for most of you who remember, they have to have been 1967-1992. In 1967, Union Church had 788 members. In 1992, Union Church had 244 members. That's 544 members less, between 1967 and 1992, or a loss of just under 60% over those twenty-five years.

Let's take a ten-year period. In 1969 there were 785 members, and in 1979 there were 374. That's a loss of a little over 52% over those ten years. From 1982 to 1992? Well, that's a little better: from 356 to 244, or a little over 31%. Then from the beginning of 1992 to the end of 2001, beginning of 2002: from 244 to 98, or almost 60%—almost...back to the Good Old Days?

Now, nine years ago, we had 98 members. Last year, we counted 77—so that's a little over 21% loss. Looks like we have been pushing back the tide a little, in spite of how we might be feeling at the moment. That's the best we've done since the nineteen-fifties. George Bonnell told the congregation in 1960 that they'd taken 324 inactive members off the rolls since 1957. So you see, the numbers have always been higher than they really were—that's just churches.

Now then, since it's stewardship season, what about the *giving* in the Good Old Days? In some old stewardship sermons I found in a book that dates from the nineteen-fifties, the issues were... recent economic hardship (yes, in the 'Fifties!), the expense of maintaining enormous, aging buildings, the difficulty of saving enough for one's children, as costs were going up, and still being able to give enough to one's church...

And those figures I've given you are typical, not only for the Presbyterian Church, but for the church in North America generally during those years: Catholic, Protestant, liberal, conservative, evangelical. So really, who can we blame? I don't think there is blame to be assigned—unless we remember that all our people who've gone to another church in the neighborhood are, in fact, elders—elected and ordained to governance and leadership in the church.

But as the people blame Jesus, what does he do, there on the cross? He forgives. He encourages. He doesn't try to figure out what caused him to be there, whose fault it is, who should do what differently, how the situation came to be—just more ways of blaming. He doesn't look for a scapegoat. He shows people how to carry on without him: "Woman," he says to his mother, "behold thy son," and then to his friend John, "Son, behold thy mother." He looks to the future and not the past.

Here's another thing Jesus doesn't do: he doesn't avoid suffering. Now, you would think that anyone with any power at all, let alone God Incarnate, would have used his power to avoid the pain of crucifixion. He could have just *looked like* he was suffering, you see, to make a point. But not Jesus. For some reason he takes it all on: the full agony, the full suffering. Why does Jesus not use that power to prove himself right, to shift the blame, to avoid the suffering?

How many of you know the story of Father Damien in nineteenth-century Hawaii, who was a missionary to the leper colony on the remote island of Molokai? Robert Louis Stevenson visited him, and his story is in one of Stevenson's many travel books.

Father Damien was a Roman Catholic priest who, although he was perfectly well himself, felt called to work with these abandoned people in their suffering. He served there for many years, until, one day, he was making himself a cup of tea before the morning worship service. The water sloshed out of the cup and fell on his foot, which was bare in that tropical climate. It took a moment for him to realize that he had felt no pain, no sensation, when the hot

water fell on his bare foot. Seized by fear of what this could mean, he deliberately poured more hot water on the same foot. No feeling whatsoever. The first sign of leprosy.

Tears streaming from his eyes, he walked over to the place where everyone had gathered. At first, no one noticed the difference in his opening words. He normally began every service with, "My fellow believers..." But this morning, he began, "My fellow lepers..."

Now he was not only someone who loved them and ministered to them. Now he was one of them. He knew their suffering in a way he had never known it before: not because he could *imagine* himself in their shoes, but because *he stood in those very shoes himself*.

And you see, if they had blamed him for getting leprosy, maybe, and maybe said that he had failed them because he was no longer someone ideal to look up to, could no longer be expected to do things for them, but now shared their grief and their pain, if they had decided to assign blame to him, *they would have done themselves out of a pastor*. And we do that, don't we? One of the alternative Gospel readings for today is the Palm Sunday reading, Christ the king riding on a donkey, the beginning of the week that ends in the Crucifixion. How easily we pass from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify!" in just a few days, or weeks—or months, or years?

But this is what Jesus does: he shares our suffering, and calls each one of us to do the same—your leaders, and your followers. When we suffer, Jesus suffers. When we hurt, Jesus hurts. When we have a terrible disease or are facing death, Jesus faces it with us. Exhaustion, weakness, loneliness, abandonment, failure. Fear, powerlessness, despair. Physical and spiritual brokenness. Death itself.

On the cross, Jesus experiences all these things. And it is from the throne of the cross that Jesus reigns. He shares our suffering by entering into it, by going through it himself. Don't take that away from him! *Because the One we confess as King and Lord shares our suffering, we know that we are never alone*. We know where to go for comfort and strength, when every human being fails us, as every human being will—spouses, friends, pastors. We're all in life together, and it will take all of us to discern where *God*, in Christ, is leading all of us. And we know because of the Resurrection that *suffering never has the last word*.

What else do you see in Rockefeller Center? You see that great golden statue of Atlas—Atlas, he's such a powerfully built man, every muscle and sinew straining to its limit, and he's holding the whole world on his shoulders. He's the strongest man in the world, superhuman in fact, but he can barely stand up under the burden.

And what do you see across the street? If you go into St Patrick's Cathedral, and walk around behind the high altar there, you'll see a little statue of Jesus. He's not a baby, but he's not an adult, either: he's standing there, about eight or nine years old, and with no effort at all, *he's holding the world in one hand*.

To say, "Christ is King!" means that we don't carry our burdens on our own backs alone, nor do we dump them on each other, or expect any miraculous interventions, or waste our energy pointing blaming fingers, at ourselves or anyone else. To say, "Christ is King!" is to trust that God will bear all things. To say, "Christ is King!" is to lift up our hearts and hands to do the work of the One who saves us, who loves us, and who calls us, fearless and filled with awe, away from a fading past into an ever-more-glorious future. AMEN.