

## “RETURN OF THE KING”

Ezekiel 34: 11-24; Ephesians 1:15-23  
November 26, 2017 – Christ the King Sunda  
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We come now to the end of the church year. You may not realize it, but the church year does not correspond to the calendar year, the school year, or anyone’s fiscal year. We have our system. The church year is structured around the life of Jesus. We begin with Advent (next week) which is a season of preparation for the coming of Jesus. Christmas, a short season in contrast with the commercial one that begins right after Halloween, marks his birth. Epiphany celebrates the coming of the wise men. From there we move through a season which we now call ordinary time. We start with a reflection on his baptism and finish with the transfiguration. In Lent, we spend time reflecting on his earthly ministry finishing with the Last Supper and crucifixion. In Easter, we focus not on bunnies and butterflies, but on the resurrection. We then have a day for the ascension quickly followed by Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then we have the long green season, also known as “ordinary time” or some still refer to it as the season after Pentecost. Almost six months later we close out the year with Christ the King Sunday.

The theme for this day is straightforward and reflected well in the reading from Ephesians: “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.... And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church....”

You won’t find this image in the gospels where Jesus talks about having nowhere to lay his head. He does heal diseases and perform wonders, but he gets no respect from the religious leaders of the day. He is helpless before the authorities as he walks without resistance to his own death. Despite the weakness of the Jesus in the gospels, I much prefer him to this image of a king seated on a throne with everything in subjection to him. I’ve no objection to the idea that Jesus is in control, but this sounds a bit oppressive. Words like “top down” and “hierarchy” and even “dictatorial” pop into my head. Even as I think of this as a “benevolent monarchy,” the warning bells are going off in my head, wondering how this is going to impinge on my freedom. Any day when singing “What a Friend I have in Jesus” seems inappropriate makes me wonder. There are plenty of people who’d just as soon skip this day.

But I’m not one of them. I love this day. I love the enthusiasm called for by the hymns and the notion that Jesus is much more than just my friend. I’m not minimizing the value of Jesus’ friendship, but when you get the eviction notice and you need \$800 to avoid being put out on the street, you need a friend *with resources*. When you’re being bullied on the way to school, you need a friend with *bulk*. I love this day because it anticipates the day when the oppressed will be not just comforted, but freed. We are moving away from Jesus, meek and mild, to the Jesus who brings about justice, who raises up the

poor and puts down those who are consumed by greed. This is the love that doesn't just endure hate, but conquers it.

I love this day because it looks forward to and celebrates that day when all is right with the world. So how did we get from the resurrection of Jesus, the day when we rejoice that all is right with Jesus, to Christ the king when all is now right with the world? What happens in the six months that "put all things under the feet" of Christ?

If you think about the church year, it looks like we follow the life of Jesus for about six months, then forget about him as we follow the work of the spirit and the growth of the church. Six months later we come back to Jesus, only he's very different. Suddenly he's very much in charge.

I don't remember the history behind the way we have come to structure the church year, but I think we need to see this structure differently. We need to think about the second half of the year less as Jesus on vacation so that we can talk about the spirit and the church and more as an essential part of the life of Jesus.

Paul wrote that God has made Jesus "the head over all things for the church, *which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" Paul says to the church in Corinth, "You are the body of Christ." Jesus doesn't go away. He gives himself away... to the church. When we talk about the church, we are talking about the life of Jesus. So in the first half of the year we are learning about the life of Jesus and in the second half we are taking that life into ourselves.

So when we come to Christ the King Sunday, it is not as though Jesus takes control by some surprise coup to squash all our previous loyalties and demand absolute obedience. We have been preparing for this day, sharing his life for some time, building up a relationship of trust and love. Jesus doesn't have to command our loyalty. He's been busy earning it.

Several weeks ago I was watching *The Return of the King*. One of many endings in the extended version of the movie shows Aragorn's coronation as the king of Gondor. Gondor has been without a king, ruled instead by stewards for many years. The celebration is genuine, not just because the city has been saved from certain conquest by the evil Lord Sauron, not just because Aragorn has shown himself to be mighty in battle and greatly to be feared, but because the citizens recognize in Aragorn one who loves them.

We see him throughout Tolkien's trilogy as one who protects the vulnerable, one who risks his life again and again for others, one who rejects the rule of evil, one who accepts the differences that had previously separated others, fighting for elves, dwarves, hobbits, men and women.

So too, Jesus power on this day, is founded on a love that has been demonstrated in the life we live, not on a fear based on threats and violence. We live somewhere

between the resurrection of Jesus and the recognition of Jesus as Lord of all. We are his life today, his body, his hands, his feet. We are learning to recognize him in the thinking of our minds, the movement of our hearts and souls, and the doing of our bodies.

Ezekiel speaks to a people exiled from the home and conquered by foreign powers. Their king is not dead and so he speaks to them of a time when the king returns. When this king returns he will come as a shepherd who finds good pasture for his sheep, who will protect them from the ravages of evil shepherds. This shepherd will bind up the injured, seek out the lost, and bring back those who have strayed.

We hear echoes of Psalm 23 in these verses, but we also see a shepherd who is not weak, one who will stand against the threats of the world, and is able to administer justice.

In a sense, we too await the return of the king, for we look toward a kingdom where we find rest from our struggles, healing for our dis-eases, and justice for those who have been wronged. But we are not just waiting, we are already following. We know that the king, Christ the King, is already among us; that we are in fact a part of his living, partners in the practice of love.

I can think of no more appropriate way to end the church year than in a celebration of one whose love never leaves us, whose love gives us courage for the living of these days, and whose love sustains our hope for that day when there shall be neither pain nor sorrow anymore. Amen.