

Christ the King Year C 2019 SSP

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; St. Luke 23:33-43

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Since the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer was revised in 1979, the Last Sunday after Pentecost (the Sunday next before Advent) has had lessons drawn for what is called Christ the King, bringing us in line, as in many other things, with the usage of the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutherans, and other Protestant churches.

The Feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, in response to the rise of menacing totalitarian notions of kingship, particularly fascism and communism. Later, in 1969, during the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI moved the feast to where it is now at the end of "Ordinary Time" and renamed it the Feast of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. It was adopted in short order by other western churches and has ecumenical acclaim.

Pope Paul VI's new name for the feast suits our second lesson, Saint Paul's letter to the Colossians, admirably. Let's hear it again. "In [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether or earth on in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." This is so extraordinary. Jesus Christ is king of the universe! He is the healer of the universe! He is the firstborn from the dead for the renewed universe. It is Good News beyond comprehension.

Yet when it was seen by eyewitnesses, that is, the blood of his cross, it shattered his friends and followers. Saint Luke tells the story today. His judges and killers mocked. “He saved others; himself he cannot save.” And one of the malefactors crucified next to him similarly reviled him. But the other, the penitent thief whose name lives in tradition as Saint Dismas, rebuked the reviler, confessed Jesus’s innocence, and begged the Lord to remember him in his kingdom. And has anyone ever heard a richer blessing, especially as they were dying: “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” We have come from Christ the healer of the cosmos to Christ the savior of the criminal. Or should we say it in order of the church’s grasp of this truth: Jesus the companion/savior of the criminal is Christ the King of the Universe. We go from the word of dying Saint Dismas to the apostolic teaching of Saint Paul.

In his book, *Training in Christianity*, which has deeply influenced me ever since I read it in seminary, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard repeatedly sharpens the double “offense” of the Gospel. On the one hand, he says, the world (which did not know him) is scandalized to find that its creator is that Jewish man dying on the cross in 33 AD in Jerusalem. On the other hand, he says, the world (which attempted to annihilate him) is scandalized to discovered that its victim is in fact its creator. To quote Saint John, He was in the world, and the world was made by him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own, and own people received him not.

There follows a “but” in Saint John. BUT to those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And [so] the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

At diocesan convention on Saturday November 9 at St. Luke’s East Greenwich, nearly the last item on the agenda was the Bishop’s Address, required by canon law. We had finished

our business, but we had lunch before the address and before courtesy resolutions and adjournment. I am not a resident priest in Rhode Island, I am licensed to officiate as a priest resident in the Diocese of New York where I retired. I was a registered guest accompanying Saint Stephen's lay delegates who were Jacob Ihnen and Nancy Gingrich. Fr. Bill Locke was with us in the pews. I was ready to go home and have a nap. I wasn't ready for what I was about to hear from Bishop Knisely.

The Bishop spoke of the mysteries that we have before us, week after week, day after day, in the church. He mentioned how precious is the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer as a lifeline to Holy Scripture and to the mystical communion of other church members. He mentioned that in the Holy Communion we have put into our hand the Creator of the Universe as our food and drink. He also mentioned that the same Creator has emptied himself into bread and wine as our life and nourishment. He had some slides showing the host in a recipient's hand.

Then he said he thinks we all (he included himself) often miss the awesome, mind-boggling mystery that is placed right into our midst, our hands, our mouths, our bodies. He said that church routines can callous our souls and numb our minds to the wonder right before us. This of course is due to our poor fallen nature, the very nature that Christ came to save and heal; the very condition that his self-giving has had in view from before the beginning of time.

It was an extraordinary word to hear anywhere from the Bishop, but all the more at the conclusion of a Diocesan Convention. It would have been a powerful word in a sermon or on a retreat. But at the end of long day full of church business, it was as though the Apostle himself had stepped into the room. As at Colossae, dealing with that church's dirty laundry, its calloused spirit and its heretical temptations, the Word came in all its Gospel power.

Dear friends, we are at the end of another church year. We are collecting our pledges and offering them. We are concerned, rightly, about all this, especially about our future and the call of our next rector. But here, now, let us not overlook the wonder that is put into our hands, our mouths, our bodies. The Creator and King of the Universe has made himself our food and drink. In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.