

Christ the King C (11/24/2019)
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

"Crucified King" is a contradiction in terms. We expect kings to exercise violent power, to crucify – not become victims of violent power, to suffer crucifixion. Throughout the ages, kings have gotten blood on their hands. But, the only blood on the Crucified King's hands is his own, and by enduring the cross – by refusing to deal in the ways of kings – he becomes the only king who can guide us into the way of peace.

The New York Times woefully underestimated the threat of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism. In a 1922 article, the first the newspaper ever published about Germany's rising political star, the author downplayed Hitler's rhetoric as nothing more than a campaign strategy:

... several reliable, well-informed sources confirmed the idea that Hitler's anti-Semitism was not so genuine or violent as it sounded, and that he was merely using anti-Semitic propaganda as a bait to catch masses of followers and keep them aroused, enthusiastic, and in line for the time when his organization is perfected and sufficiently powerful to be employed effectively for political purposes.

A sophisticated politician credited Hitler with peculiar political cleverness for laying emphasis and over-emphasis on anti-Semitism, saying: "You can't expect the masses to understand or appreciate your finer real aims. You must feed the masses with cruder morsels and ideas like anti-Semitism. It would be politically all wrong to tell them the truth about where you really are leading them."¹

Of course, this assessment was mistaken. Hitler made good on his anti-Semitism by registering, rounding up, and massacring six million European Jews in

¹ <http://www.snopes.com/1922-new-york-times-hitler/>.

the decades immediately following the publication of the article in the Times. The führer had blood on his hands. “And the people stood by, watching.”

It may seem odd to celebrate the festival of Christ the King by remembering his cross. After all, on the surface, the crucifixion appeared to be the least regal moment of Jesus’ life. His executioners heaped humiliation on top of his suffering by jeering him with false accolades: “...let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God,” “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” *This is no king*, they decided. **Kings do not hang pitifully from instruments of public torture and execution, devices of state-sanctioned terrorism. No, real kings subject other people to their will, by brutal force if necessary; real kings have blood on their hands. And most of the time, the people stand by, watching.**

We, too, may reject a king who in the height of conflict neither defends himself nor denounces his enemies. We may recoil at the notion of a king who does not seek to conquer, but who is conquered. So, we may prefer to mark the festival of Christ the King instead by recalling Jesus’ acts of power, or his timeless wisdom, or his enthronement “at the right hand of the Father.”² Now, those are the characteristics of a king!

“Crucified King,” on the other hand, is a contradiction in terms. We expect a king to rule by might, to crucify; not to become a victim of the mighty, and to suffer

² Apostles’ Creed.

crucifixion. But the Christian confession is precisely that: **The true king is crucified, standing in for all who suffer unjustly at the hands of the Powers.**³

The festival of Christ the King itself emerged in defiance of such Powers. Christ the King Sunday didn't find its way onto the liturgical calendar until 1925, less than a century ago, when Pope Pius XI instituted the festival in response to the rise of authoritarian regimes across Europe. In his encyclical, *Quas primas*, Pius decreed: "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence or usurped, but his by essence and by nature."⁴ In other words, Christ is king, not Stalin. Christ is king, not Hitler. **Christ is king, not any earthly ruler who promises peace and prosperity by means of domination or suppression.**

When we read our history, we recognize how regularly earthly kings get blood on their hands. It's what crowns them kings in the first place, and keeps them on their thrones. All the while, vulnerable people, despised people are marked, dehumanized, and led away to their own crosses. And too often, as in Nazi Germany and elsewhere, the people have stood by, watching.

But, **the only blood on the Crucified King's hands is his own. As far removed as the cross appears to be from any throne, Christ is crowned king in the very moment that he renounces violent power and hangs closest to the crucified of this world.** Notice that only the dying thief, the lowest and most reviled among those at the scene, recognizes Jesus' royal identity for what it really is. The

³ See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/christ-the-king-c-what-kind-of-king-do-you-want/>.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_the_King.

people who exercise power at Golgotha mock Jesus with sardonic titles, but only the thief gets a glimpse of the truth: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And, in spite of his executioners’ proud assumptions, Jesus’ refusal to save himself does not render him incapable of saving others⁵: “Truly I tell you,” he promises the helpless man at his side, “today you will be with me in paradise.”

That’s the nature of the Crucified King. He makes an offer of salvation not necessarily from death, but in and even through it.⁶ **Earthly kings lead by fear and claims to supremacy, but the Crucified King leads by forgiveness and the promise of abundant life, even for those who strip him of his dignity and his life.**

Dear church, which king will we trust? Are we satisfied to stand by, watching, when earthly kings make victims of the most vulnerable among us? Or, **can we trust Christ the King to endure the cross for our sake, and by refusing to deal in the way of kings, to become the only king who can guide us into the way of peace?**⁷

On this festival of Christ the King, to adapt the words of Pope Pius, its founder, **may Christ “reign in our minds,” and lead us into true wisdom; may Christ “reign in our wills,” and lead us into obedience to his command, may Christ “reign in our hearts,” and lead us into cross-shaped love, and may Christ “reign in our bodies,” and make us “instruments of justice unto God.”**⁸

⁵ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 818.

⁶ Ibid. 822.

⁷ Luke 1:79.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_Christ_the_King.