

**Sermon for Christ the King Sunday-Year B**

**November 21, 2021**

**Texts: Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; Psalm 93; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37**

It seems hard to believe that November is 2/3 over,  
That Thanksgiving is this week,  
And that we have reached the last Sunday in the Church Year.

Since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
The last Sunday in the Church Year has been celebrated  
In the Lutheran Church as Christ the King Sunday.

The origins of this day  
Date back to 1925,  
When Pope Pius XI instituted  
The celebration of Christ as King  
In the aftermath of World War I.

A complex web of treaties  
Between countries and empires  
Had dragged the world into World War I,  
And into the post-war chaos.

In those years following WWI,  
Secular leaders were becoming ever more powerful,  
While respect for Christ's authority seemed to be waning.

I think that most of us in the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of the 21st century  
Can resonate with the situation  
Of increasingly powerful world leaders,  
Coupled with limited public acknowledgment of God's will for us.

It was Pope Pius XI's intent  
That nations, leaders and the faithful recognize  
That Christ must reign above all else.

I have a memory from a European trip,  
From back in the days when foreign travel was easy and carefree,  
That captures the conflict between the Reign of Christ,  
And the reign of powerful state leaders.

In both the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna  
And the Matthias Church at the Budapest Castle,  
There are prominent statues of King Franz Josef  
And Queen Elizabeth, known as Cissy,  
Who reigned in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1916.

I found these statues, in close proximity to the altar  
To be very disconcerting,  
And not just because of my American sense  
Of separation of church and state.

I thought that having prominent visual imagery  
Of Kings and Queens  
Distracted from the sacred nature of the altar  
Where Holy Communion is celebrated  
With its visualization of Jesus' body and blood.

For me, recognizing and giving authority  
To secular leaders in a church sanctuary,  
Causes confusion as to who is being worshipped.

From the time of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD,  
When Constantine made Christianity  
The official religion of the Roman Empire  
Until at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century,  
There was a tendency, particularly in Europe,  
To combine and confuse  
Religious and secular authority.

In celebrating Christ the King Sunday,  
The US has a different type of problem,  
As we, typically, are not particularly fond of kings.

Consequently the label for this Sunday  
Doesn't really capture any conflict  
We may feel between God's authority  
And governmental decisions.

Compounding the American difficulty  
With the theme of this celebration,  
Is the location of this feast day  
On the last Sunday of the church year,  
Late in November.

Most of us today,  
Would have felt more comfortable,  
Coming to church  
And having a Thanksgiving service.

Our hearts and our minds  
Have turned to next Thursday's US feast day,  
Where we gather to give thanks with family and friends.

With this US cultural backstory,  
It can be hard for us to shift gears this morning,  
To think about secular vs. divine authority  
And to hear a Gospel lesson, that is part of the crucifixion narrative,  
Which focuses on Jesus' dialogue with Pilate.

So...how do we make sense of Christ as King,  
And of God's authority for our lives,  
In our 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture?

One way to grapple with idea of Christ as King  
Is to riff on Jesus' answer when Pilate questioned him,  
"So you are a king?"

"For this I was born,  
And for this I came into the world,  
To testify to the truth.  
Everyone who listens to the truth listens to my voice."

Jesus does not focus on kingship,  
And whether or not he is a king.  
Rather, Jesus uses his answer  
To focus on his God-given role to testify to the Truth.

Following Jesus' theme,  
On the Christ the King Sunday,  
Rather than focusing on robes and royalty,  
We might ask ourselves: What is truth for us?

Now, the question of what is Truth,  
Is well worth grappling with in 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modern America.

Today, truth seems to be very fluid.  
What is true for you seems to depend  
On which news station you listen to,  
What political leaning you have,  
And who you follow on social media.

How do we grapple with any discontinuity  
Between the supposed truths  
That occupy our daily lives  
And Jesus, the Word of God?

Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and life."

Yet....To what or whom, do we grant power?

Is Jesus, the Word of God,  
The truth on which we base our lives,  
Or are we sucked into so-called truths and half truths  
That circulate around us?

How do Jesus' words stack up  
Against media barrages and relentless advertising?

There are many things in our lives  
To which we grant authority.

To name just a few,  
We often take medical, food, or exercise advice as truth.

Sometimes we are disappointed,  
When the apparent truth changes,  
Either because new data comes forth,  
Changing scientific hypotheses,  
Or because what we thought was solid truth  
Was merely opinion.

Many of us have been confused,  
As new information is learned about the spread of COVID,  
And as the scientists gather more data about how vaccines work,  
And whether boosters are needed.

When I was a working scientist, I did not classify my findings as truth,  
Rather I would refer to them as hypotheses or deductions  
Based on the best data that I had at the time.

In another example of having to evaluate truth,  
We often absorb partial truths from advertising  
About how this product or that service will change our lives.

We might assume that what has been stated is true,  
But much may have been left unsaid.  
The full truth may not always be revealed,  
And sometimes what is stated as truth is actually twisted misinformation.

Today, because of how news is presented, we often fail to differentiate  
Between information or scientific hypotheses,  
And fundamental or eternal Truths.

Much of what we hear on a daily basis  
Is information, partial information  
Or even opinion masquerading as truth.

Jesus, on the other hand, says:  
“For this I was born  
And for this I came into the world,  
To testify to the truth.”

Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life,  
Distills the eternal Truth of his teaching into the Law of Love,  
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart  
And all your mind  
And love your neighbor as yourself.”

Do you give authority to Christ  
And his truth about love,  
Or do you give authority  
To those who use partial truths and opinion  
To sow anger, violence and hate.

In a climate of anger, hate and partial information,  
It is easy to fall into a life of fear.

Do we allow this fear become truth for us?

Or do we hear Jesus’ words:  
“For I was hungry  
And you gave me food,  
I was thirsty  
And you gave me something to drink,  
I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

Do we give authority  
To Jesus, who came to testify to the truth,  
Or do we give authority to those who benefit when we fear and hate?

There is so much to be afraid of in today’s world.  
That it is very easy to slip onto the hamster wheel of fear

You can choose from a menu of fear options,  
Pandemic, violent killers on the streets,  
Mass murders, shortages of basic goods,  
Inflation, or climate change.  
Any one of these can keep you awake at night.

But when you give authority to fear  
Rather than to the One who testifies to the Truth,  
Those who benefit when you are fearful,  
Have won the battle.

Our current situation  
Is not the first time that God's people  
Have faced scary situations.  
Our readings today were all written  
To people in the midst of terror.

The Book of Daniel was written  
To Jews living two centuries before Christ,  
Under an empire that imprisoned their men,  
Tortured their women,  
And burned their places of worship.

Daniel's cryptic vision was recorded  
To bring a hope to these people  
That there is One greater  
Than their evil secular emperor.

Daniel speaks: "To Him was given dominion, glory and kingship,  
And his dominion is an everlasting dominion."

John of Patmos recorded his revelation to early Christians  
Living in the Roman Empire,  
Who never knew when they might end up  
Sharing an arena with a lion.

John writes: "Grace to you and peace from him  
Who is and who was and who is to come."

Situations and world events  
Capable of producing fear  
Have been a way of life for God's people.

Pope Pius XI's focus on the Christ as King  
Was designed to provide people with a different truth,  
The truth of the One  
Who came to bring light and hope into a world,  
Filled with fear and conflicting secular authority.

John of Patmos speaks of this One in his benediction:  
"Grace to you and peace from him  
Who is and who was and who is to come."  
Grace and peace to you 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens,  
Living in fear and terror.

Grace and peace to you who never know  
If you or your loved ones will contract COVID,

If political disagreements will threaten your Thanksgiving dinner,  
Or if you might be standing in the wrong place during a violent attack.

Grace and peace to you  
From the One who came to testify to the truth,  
The eternal truth that you belong to God  
Who promises to be with you  
In whatever fears you face,  
And who promises to bring a different kind of peace into your life.

Amen