

## Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Today's the last Sunday of the Church Year when we celebrate Christ the King, or if you wanna get fancy and use its full title, The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. This is one of the newest additions to the liturgical calendar. While the idea goes back to the earliest church writers and scripture, too, the official feast began in 1925 when the pope saw the world tearing itself in two over earthly ideologies. With World War I and the Russian Revolution's shockwaves echoing across the globe, Pope Pius XI saw deep divisions growing deeper everywhere, and he did that thing that so many of us find hard to do. He stopped, stepped back from the quagmire, and zoomed out.

What he saw was a world tearing itself apart over systems made up by human beings. Capitalism and Communism were at each other's throats, and he knew the chasm would only grow wider. So Pious declared a new feast. He figured if he just wrote out theology only the clergy would care, but if he made it a party, everybody'd get in on it. Now, I don't agree with everything he said. I especially don't like the parts about establishing a global empire spreading compulsory Christianity. But, he did provide other solid justifications. Here's some highlights:

The state of things may perhaps be attributed to a certain slowness and timidity in good people, who are reluctant to engage in conflict; thus the enemies of the Church become bolder in their attacks. ... (and foster) that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels. ... (There is) a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage. We saw men and nations ... stirring up strife and discord and hurrying along the road to ruin and death. (And so) it would be a grave error to say that Christ has no authority whatsoever in civil affairs ... for his kingly dignity demands that the State should take account of the commandments of God and of Christian principles, both in making laws and in administering justice.

Y'all, that's religion, but it's also politics. The very purpose of this day from the outset was to remind folks that their faith can and should affect the entire world, including the political world.

I recognize many of you are good Protestants, so quoting a pope isn't all that compelling. That's fine, let's do *sola scriptura* for a second. Among the many other titles Jesus bears, several are political. "Messiah" and "Christ" both mean "Anointed One," a title reserved for kings and prophets (prophets, for what it's worth, were effectively the modern equivalent of cabinet members). He's called "Lord," "Prince," and "King," all political entities to varying degrees. He's "The Morning Star," a title co-opted from the Emperor of Babylon. And he's "The King of Kings," a title co-opted from the Assyrians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans. Political rulers, all. Even in that exchange with Pilate, Jesus describes his Kingdom. A Kingdom that incidentally, when humanity was given the choice, we rejected in favor of the convict Barrabas.

Now, here's the thing. Going way back, God said, "you don't need a king 'cause you've got me." But the people insisted, God gave in, and the long and slow descent to destruction began. Some say David was the exception, but before we defend kings because David was "the apple of God's eye," recall what David did. He was a murderer, a lecher, an adulterer, and a son-killer. His entire story is that of a faithful and unlikely rise to power followed by the destruction power brings to one's soul. That doesn't negate the good he did, but it isn't exactly a silver bullet endorsement for earthly kings, either. Thing is, we Americans don't like kings. That's kinda how we got started as a country. With Thanksgiving coming later this week, it's worth remembering the lengths people of faith went to to escape that system of governance and find a place where they could practice their faith. It's a reminder that we began as religious people responding with faith to political reality.

But this holiday--Christ the King--this holiday's one of the reasons I find it so hard to draw a line between so-called "preaching politics" in favor of "just sticking to the Bible." When we look at what Jesus did and what Jesus asked us to do, it's hard stuff. If we try to live into all of it, we will fail, but we keep at it. We keep at it right here on Madison Street greeting our neighbors with love. And far as Jesus is concerned, none of that gets to stop just because a single toe slips over the imaginary line delineating politics from Biblical mandates.

Let me put this differently. I'm working with the Village Board to see if we can get some parking changes done out front, maybe even put in a handicap spot or two. That's a government entity. At a very basic level, that's me getting involved in politics. But it's worth engaging the political sphere to make that change so that those who need it the most'll have their lives made easier. So why should we stop when bigger things are at stake like healthcare or housing programs or feeding the hungry? Why should we stop just because those things sometimes fall in the political sphere, too? I've shared this Archbishop Desmond Tutu quote with y'all before: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in. But when I ask why people are falling in, I'm discounted as a socialist." I'm gonna keep sharing that quote until the stigma of demanding accountability for those harmed by those in authority's no longer needed.

Look, I'm a priest. It's my job to encourage y'all and me to make this world better, to move it closer to the Kingdom of God and further from the Kingdom of Humankind. At times, that's inherently a political task with political repercussions and political challenges. That does not mean the government needs to be Christian. But it does mean that we have a responsibility to protect and push each other regardless of who puts up the roadblocks. It makes no difference if that's a neighbor or a governor. What's right is right, and they--we--need to be reminded of that. People are suffering. People will continue to suffer. We aren't going to erase suffering from this world, but we can alleviate some suffering for some people. I see absolutely no reason why we should push for that alleviation of suffering in every aspect of our lives and then stop because politics might have something to say. And, for the record, there's not a clear line. The IRS is clear about not endorsing people or parties by name and not making donations over a million bucks, but beyond that, there is no clear place where the political stops and the religious begins.

Again, I have no desire to see a Christian government. But I also have no desire to see Christians stop living into Jesus' teachings because of an arbitrarily drawn line. The real questions are not what politicians should do or what politicians say you should do. The real questions are what followers of Christ the King should do. And that's tough. The things he asks of us give little credence to the rulers of this world, and the rulers of this world don't much like that. But also, how many Christians would actually like to see someone like Jesus bear the authority of government? Who would pay for his social programs? Who would give up the best seat in the house so a homeless person could take their spot? Who would sell all they have so the poor could live another day?

In my decade plus in pulpits, I've been accused many times of preaching and teaching politics when simply quoting scripture. I'll own it that I have, from time to time, slipped my toe a bit further over the line than some might like, but what amazes me is the number of times just quoting scripture gets brushed aside as overtly political. I'm amazed, but I'm not surprised because so much of scripture is political, or rather, so much of scripture addresses topics that also fall in the political realm. Back in 2005, Baylor University--Baptists, mind you--conducted a study that showed surprising results. The more someone read the Bible, the more politically progressive they became. Even more surprising, how much was directly correlated to how literally they interpreted scripture. In other words, literalists that read the Bible and take it at its own word are more likely to shift to the left of the political spectrum. To be clear, this does not mean that Democrats are the Party of Jesus.

They. Are. Not. But what it does mean is that our political world has gotten so lost that making claims from scripture has become a partisan stance. And further, so many people rely on learning the Bible from some sort of cultural osmosis that they've stopped reading it themselves. Y'all, this is why I put so much stress on going to Bible Study. (Once again, I'm pitching Bible Study and we're not even meeting this week. Next Thursday, I promise!)

I don't encourage Bible Study to make you into subjects that vote like I'd like you to. It's to provide Biblical fluency so that when any politician tries to persuade you that their agenda is the moral agenda, you'll know this stuff well enough to distinguish for yourself God's Kingdom from Humanity's. That's why we read scripture. That's why we come together and keep each other honest. That's why we celebrate Christ the King. Because defining what the church is about never should've belonged to the realm of politics. It belongs to us. So reclaim it, learn it, and above all else, live it. That's how we serve Christ our King.