

CHRIST THE KING | NOVEMBER 20, 2022

JEREMIAH 23:1-6 | PSALM 46 | COLOSSIANS 1:11-20 | LUKE 23:33-43

Some of you may know that our denomination released a new hymnal supplement about a year ago. The majority of it is new music, but it also has some supplementary material that's interesting. One of the most helpful supplements is a section called "Scriptural Images for God." It runs for three pages and lists images for God under headings such as: God as a quality, element of nature, object, animal, woman, man, embodied person, human being, and divine being. And if you look on the second page about halfway down, you can see God described as a king.

Why am I telling you this? Just to say that the image of God as king is one image among many. But it's an image that has its own day in our church calendar. We could just as easily have Christ the Vine Sunday or Christ the Morning Star Sunday or Christ the Hen Sunday. So why do we have Christ the King?

The short version of that story is that about a hundred years ago, Pope Pius XI was concerned about the political landscape emerging after the Great War. You have these political and economic systems that promise salvation, but Pius thinks they all fall short. He sees the Soviet Union as "cruel and inhumane." He sees the capitalist West as a "oppressed by wretched poverty." And he sees a growing anti-clerical movement at home as a dead end. In one of his writings, he describes the need for a "social justice" that avoids the "reefs of individualism and collectivism."¹

One of the ways Pius tries to offer another way forward is by coming up with a new feast day called Christ the King. When you're the pope, you can do that kind of thing. And the point is clear. The king is not Stalin or Mussolini or John D. Rockefeller. The king is Jesus.

You can imagine this being powerful in its original context. In our context, probably less so. With a few of exceptions, we tend to think of kings as figureheads, people who go to ribbon-cutting ceremonies and wave to tourists. And so you could imagine getting rid of Christ the King Sunday entirely. Maybe go find something else on that list. Christ the Garment-Maker Sunday or Christ the Metalworker Sunday.

But there is something in that king image that may have some relevance for us. Around the time we Lutherans started observing Christ the King in the 1960s², the Catholic Church issued this explanation of its importance. And this is probably more relevant than the explanation that Pius gave. To say that Jesus is king, they wrote, means that he is "the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of humankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations."³

¹ "Quadragesimo Anno (May 15, 1931) | PIUS XI," accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html.

² It was originally celebrated on the Sunday when Lutherans were celebrating Reformation Sunday. I believe it was moved around Vatican II.

³ Quoted from "The Not-So-Ancient Origins of Christ the King Sunday — Lutheran Forum," accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday>.

Christ the King reminds us that Jesus is the center of humankind. A hundred years ago, it meant that the center of humankind was not Stalin or Mussolini or J.P. Morgan. The center was Jesus. And for us here today, it means that the center of life is not the Dow Jones or US News and World Report College Rankings or Elon Musk. The center is still Jesus.

That's exactly what today's reading from Colossians is about. The author of Colossians offers us this gorgeous description of who Jesus is and includes this memorable phrase. Christ is "before all things, and in him all things hold together." Because God creates through Christ, Jesus holds all things together. Jesus holds the order of creation together. Jesus holds justice and mercy together. Jesus holds life and death together. And Jesus holds all of us together.

We can never be reminded of that enough. Because so often we try to hold ourselves together. We hold ourselves together by spending time with people who talk like us or pray like us or sing like us or look like us. We take some attribute or thing we like and make that the center. This thing, this idea, this practice gives us our unity. And that unity holds up for a little bit, but it never really lasts. Because sooner or later someone shows up who doesn't talk like me. Or doesn't pray like me. Or doesn't sing like me. Or have a family arrangement like me. Or look like me. And then what? Now we have nothing holding us together.

But as our bishop often says, "Our unity comes from Jesus." Our unity does not come from the fact that we all speak the same language or eat the same food or have the same types of families or anything else that we project out onto others. Our unity comes from Jesus. It's a gift.

I was reminded of that last Saturday when Jody and I were at St. John in Passaic. St. John is one of our mission cluster partners. They do a couple services a month for people who speak English, but liturgies are mostly in Spanish. They have a large number of Mexican members, so there's an image of the virgin of Guadalupe next to the pulpit. There's an organ that gets played a couple of times a year, and most of the music is led on guitar, a drum kit, and maracas. Before the pandemic, one of their most important ministries was celebrating mass for day laborers in a Home Depot parking lot. If you put St. John and Advent next to each other, the first thing you notice are our differences.

But what would you see in both communities? You would see Jesus Christ made known in word and sacrament. The assembly of people who are joined together in the waters of baptism, hear the promises of God through the written word, gather at Christ's holy meal, and are sent by the Spirit to serve. That's what at the center. That's where our unity comes from.

Five hundred years ago, the reformers made that point clear when they defined the church using the most open language possible. The church, they said, is simply the assembly where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.⁴ They defined the church not by its edges but by its center.

And so St. John and Advent, which are different in many ways, can still be united. This is also why we can have full communion partnerships with Wyckoff Reformed and

⁴ From the Augsburg Confession, but you can find a good interpretation at "Full Communion Partners," ELCA.org, accessed November 15, 2022, [http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical and Inter Religious Relations/Full Communion](http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical%20and%20Inter%20Religious%20Relations/Full%20Communion).

Grace Methodist. So Pastor Andy or Pastor Brian could both preach and preside here. Because our unity doesn't come from our hymnals or our language or our culture or history. Our unity comes from Jesus. Or as the author of Colossians says, "In [Jesus], all things hold together."

As we celebrate the feast day he came up with, it's important to remember that Pope Pius XI ended up getting some important things wrong. It would be a mistake to make him into some kind of hero. But one thing he got right is that the kingship of Jesus liberates us.

Because Jesus is king, because he holds us together, that liberates us up from having to hold ourselves together. I always find it sort of funny when people mention to me that there are some people in church that they wouldn't choose to spend time with outside of church. They say this like it's a bad thing, but it's actually a really good thing. The kingship of Jesus brings us into relationships that we might not seek out for ourselves. Jesus frees us from the narrowness of our own interests.

And because Jesus is king, because he is the center of humankind, we are liberated from making ourselves the center of all creation. We can see the diversity of God's people not as a danger to be fended off or as something that might displace us, but as a gift. Instead of encountering a church like St. John and getting anxious about our differences, we can be curious about what their perspective teaches us about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Unity does not mean that we are all the same or that we have some affinity for one another. It simply means that the Holy Spirit has turned our gazes turned toward Christ. The center of humankind, the joy of human hearts, and the king of all creation.

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