

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by Joe Lenow on Sunday, November 21, 2010, Christ the King Sunday

Colossians 1:11-20, Psalm 46, Luke 21:5-19

In the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pay attention to beginnings, and pay attention to endings.

One of my very favorite movies is the classic *The Lion in Winter*. If you haven't seen it yet, I want you to skip brunch, drive immediately to Blockbuster after the service, find a copy, and watch it right when you get home. Trust me – Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn at their best, plus Anthony Hopkins as Richard the Lionheart in his first feature film. The movie revolves around King Henry II, whose wife and three sons are all sharing the same castle at Christmastime, and each of them are trying to betray or kill all the others and ascend to the throne of England. The film is full of verbal barbs the characters throw at one another, but one scene stands out in my mind. Henry has uncovered the plots of each of his sons, and has locked them in the dungeon of the castle awaiting execution. Richard, ever the soldier, is searching around for some type of weapon to fight off the guards he hears approaching, and his brother Geoffrey looks at him and says quietly, "You fool! As if it matters how a man falls down." Richard replies, "When the fall is all that's left, it matters a great deal." And I have to agree with him. Oftentimes, I think we look at the end of a period in our lives to make some sense of what has come before: maybe the way you leave a job points makes clear that you didn't like it all that much in the first place, though you tried to tell yourself otherwise. Or maybe your goodbye party helps you remember all the happiness you found with a particular group of friends as you're setting out for a new life in a new place. Perhaps it's just remembering the last words exchanged between you and someone you loved. For whatever reason, and for better or for worse, these are the moments to which we find ourselves returning. Pay attention to beginnings, and pay attention to endings.

For those of you who have been keeping track on your liturgical calendars back home, you'll know that next week we find ourselves at a pretty significant beginning, the First Sunday of Advent, when we start our Church year anew and begin preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas. This week, however, we find ourselves at an endpoint – Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday in the Church's year. We've been through Advent, the holy season of Christmas, Epiphany, the penitential days of Lent, and the drama of Holy Week. We've read of the beginnings of the Church and the mission of the apostles in the season of Pentecost. And now, in this last week before we begin again, we echo the oldest creed known to the Christian faith – "Jesus is Lord." And we proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom, where justice will be found and where all will be reconciled to God. Now, we can talk about what that might look like. I suspect that some might understand this through the images we've found in Scripture and in Christian artwork throughout the centuries – Christ enthroned on clouds of glory, descending from a heavenly light in the East with sounds of trumpets. Others, I'm sure, would have a completely different picture – the community, empowered by the Holy Spirit, working together to create a more just society, finding the Kingdom of God among one another and in our common bonds of love. Ah, but pay attention, or you'll miss the ending we find in our Gospel today: When they came to the place which is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they

know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" And there was an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

I can't help thinking that there's something about all this that should make us a bit uncomfortable. You see, we *know* what kings are. The flowing purple robes, the massive gems set in solid gold rings, the priceless crowns, the castles, the glorious victory in battle. Just look at Henry II, snapping and plotting all his life. You know what, forget all that. You want to know what being a king looks like? Tune in to CNN in a few months during the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, and you'll get all the pictures you need. And why have so many of us here this morning spent hours at work or home looking at internet stories about the upcoming nuptials, gleeful at the prospect of another Princess Diana, and thinking what a wonderful story it is that this middle-class English girl will someday be Queen of England? Because we want to believe that there's some possibility, no matter how slim, that we could have been Queen of England, too. And before we judge our neighbors across the pond too quickly for keeping their monarchy around, let's remember that we have plenty of kings in our society where the richest 20% owns 85% of the nation's wealth.

But here, on Christ the King Sunday, we find a dramatically different picture of what it means to be a king put before us. Remember that our Gospel reading today gives us the second time in the period of a week that Jesus had been announced as the King of the Jews; the first time, he had been welcomed into the city by the Israelites who hoped he would take up political power and free him from the oppression of Rome. They, too, knew what they were looking for in a ruler. When Christ failed to live up to expectations, he was handed over to the Romans; all they could see was a laughingstock, a Jewish peasant who announced a new kingdom but obviously had no power to bring it about. And so they crucified him under the false belief that Christ wished to challenge their Empire and set up a new rule. Don't misunderstand me – it's true enough that the teaching of Jesus stands against all the systems of oppression we try to set up over one another... but we make a profound mistake if we think that God's kingship is just domination by a more powerful, maybe even an infinitely powerful being. What we find today is a King who chose to assume human flesh and live among us, a King who offered Himself up so that we could find our true humanity in our reconciliation to God. And so we're given a picture of what kingship really means, what Paul calls an "image of the invisible God." You want to know what it means to be Lord of heaven and earth? Look here – look to my Body, broken, tired; given for you.

The Gospel of St. Luke tells us today that the true kingship of God is not the naked exercise of power, but a much more profound power that appears in weakness; not mastery, but servanthood. You see, the soldiers of the Roman Empire were not wrong when they hung a sign over the crucified Jesus proclaiming him King of the Jews – and that's what should really worry us. Ask yourself – what does serving this Lord look like in the midst of an impoverished poor community that surrounds one of the most privileged universities in the world? What does it look like in a city where over 24% of children live below the poverty level? What does it look like here at St. Luke's?

It's easy to serve most kings; pay your taxes, keep your head down, grab your sword when you're ordered to. But in Christ, we find a King that lives among the poor, works against the powers of oppression, and offers himself – even to death – so that the world might be reconciled

to God. We find a King who calls us not to pay a part of what we have as tribute, but to give all that we are. And we find a King who calls us not to be subjects, but to be disciples, sharing our lives in a community of worship and service.

This is the King we follow – the one who comes to us humbly, even born in a manger; who summons followers not to serve Him, but so that He may serve; who announces that God is working among God's people to bring justice and peace; and who finally reconciles us by enduring death at the hands of the ones he came to save, and continuing to love us nonetheless. It is this broken King upon the cross, mocked by the powerful, and suffering alongside the weak, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. And it is in looking to the Crucified One that we can say with St. Paul: in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and 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 on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Jesus is Lord; thanks be to God.