

Yr. C, Proper 29 (Christ the King)
November 24, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1615 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Today is the final Sunday of the Church Year. It is the fulfillment of all we have heard about Jesus since last December. It is the day we summarize what we believe about him. Traditionally, we summarize it this way: Christ is King! In fact, we refer to this as “Christ the King Sunday.”

The problem with familiar titles and phrases like ‘Christ the King’ is that we can easily assume this is obvious to everyone. It is not obvious...even a little bit. Actually, to believe that Christ *is* king, we have to turn our understanding of kingship totally upside down. We have to set aside statements of fact in order to make statements of faith.

The fact is that Herod the Great became the *actual* King of the Jews about 37 years before Jesus was born. Through the support of two powerful Roman rulers—Mark Antony, and later, Octavian—who became Caesar Augustus—Herod assumed the power of autonomous kingship over the Jewish people.

He was the epitome of what we think of as an autocrat, a ‘strong man.’ Although admired by those powerful Roman leaders, the vindictive Herod was despised by the people he ruled. His attitude was this: The people do not *have to like* me, so long as they *fear me*. And the people did fear Herod the Great, the King of the Jews.

Now, Jesus was not endorsed, admired, or even noticed by the Roman elite. His authority was conveyed in the *wilderness* in the muddy Jordan River. There was a still, small voice—perhaps not even audible to anyone else—which said, “You are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus trusted this Spirit of beloved-ness, and shared this Spirit with everyone he met. He understood the proper role of a leader is to *serve those* whom he leads. He summed it up best when he said of himself, “The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Consequently, the people did not fear him; they *followed* him. And we still do...for the very same reasons.

If you want to see an *actual* king, you look for his palace. Herod had at least 5 very impressive properties—from the city to the countryside to his beachfront estate. Now, walk with me through the gates of Jerusalem, ascending steps to the Upper City.

In the ancient age of gravity-based sewers, *nobody* lived uphill of the king. At the northwestern corner of Jerusalem were two grand wings of a palace with a large interior garden and three huge, finely decorated towers. The entire structure was built upon an elevated platform a thousand feet long and 180 feet wide. There were banquet halls, baths, and accommodations for *hundreds* of guests.

The ancient historian, Josephus, described the palace like this: “The largeness...of the stones was wonderful...of white marble, (It) *exceeds* my ability to describe it. (The gardens included) several groves of trees...deep canals and cisterns...filled with (bronze) statues through which the water ran out.” This sounds just right. As a matter of *fact*, kings belong in palaces.

And yet, our king had nowhere to lay his head. Jesus left home in Nazareth and remained homeless for years, moving from village to village, and city to city among the crowds of people who were desperately seeking hope, help, and healing. Our king described these people as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” And so he had *compassion* for them. He touched the unclean. He ate with the disreputable. He welcomed *and* praised foreigners. He lived *with*—and *for*—all the people whom the self-righteous religious folks and the self-

interested rulers either rejected or neglected. Consequently, the people did not avoid Jesus; they *followed* him. And we still do...for the very same reasons.

Now, let's give credit where credit is due. It is a *fact* that King Herod rebuilt the Temple—the home of God in Jerusalem. He built it back even bigger and better than it was under King Solomon. Herod also built temples honoring the supposed divinity of the Roman Emperor. The religious leaders—especially the conservative Sadducees with their wealth and aristocracy at stake—they had to just look the other way.

You see, Herod was completing amazing developments throughout the land—new theaters, hippodromes, gymnasia, baths, even whole new cities. Many Jews despised him, but nobody could argue that King Herod was leaving his indelible mark upon the economy and religion of the nation.

Our king, on the other hand, seemed only to threaten the well-established economic and religious order. He preached about blessings for the poor and woes for the rich. He spoke frequently about the evils associated with the love of money. He even predicted the material ruin of the Temple Herod had rebuilt. “The days will come,” Jesus warned, “when not one stone will be left upon another...”

Predictably, those who benefitted most from an economic and religious order that abused the poor for the benefit of the rich...they used their power to silence Jesus. And it still happens...for the very same reasons.

When Herod died there was a grand funeral procession, a ceremony fit for a king. It began at his 7-acre palace in Jericho, 846 feet below sea level, and proceeded to Herodeion, a majestic palace fortress 2,487 feet *above* sea level—the highest peak in the Judean Desert. The Greek name obviously refers to the creator and benefactor—Herod, himself. When you are as great as Herod, you can name places after yourself. This spectacular place is located about three miles southeast of the little town...of Bethlehem.

And that is where the humble story of *our* king begins. It was the place where a child was born in a barn at a time when innocent children were being slaughtered by the ruthless, vindictive King Herod. It was the place from which a brand-new mother and father fled with their baby and became refugees in Egypt.

There is a clear threat that the Lord, the God of Israel, issued through the prophet, Jeremiah, to leaders...like King Herod. (We heard the warning today): “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! I will attend to your evil doings. (And) *I* will raise up shepherds over them who *will* shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer...The days are surely coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king...and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

And so it came to pass in Bethlehem, and then later in Nazareth and around Galilee, along the Jordan and through Samaria, and up in Jerusalem. There *was* a good shepherd. He *did* shepherd the people so they would not have to live in fear. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, blessed the poor, and opened his arms to the outcasts. We know how unpopular these things *still are*.

This Good Shepherd defied the expectations and interests of the religious people. He confronted their assumptions and privileges. He challenged the leadership of the self-dealing authorities. He refused to bow before any ruler on earth, no matter how powerful. He *only* knelt down to serve the weak, the small, and the broken. This is *precisely how* Jesus executed God's justice and righteousness in the land.

It did not last long—a few years at the most—before Jeremiah's prophesy was completely fulfilled. *That is when* this righteous Branch of David was raised up...*on a cross*. Somewhere near the garbage dump, amid the smoldering waste of Jerusalem a small sign told the true story, and yet—it was intended as a joke. Just above a crown of thorns, the sign read, “*This is the King of the Jews.*”

You can't believe everything you read...especially when you already know that *actual* kings are admired by the elite. *Actual* kings live in splendid palaces. *Actual* kings build great monuments and name them after themselves. *Actual* kings have grand funeral processions to lofty places.

Meanwhile, *our king* was hung between two bandits. Our king was deserted by everyone but his mother and a friend. Our king had to be buried in a borrowed tomb.

In every age there are powerful kings and rulers like Herod who want to be remembered for their greatness. And also in every age the tender compassion of our God is clearly revealed through those who follow a king who acts more like a good shepherd—one who serves and even lays down his life for the flock.

We all know what an *actual king* looks like. The question is: what do we believe a king *should* look like?

The Good News of today's otherwise grim-sounding Gospel is that despite the tremendous power, wealth, and status of Herod the Great, he is nothing more than a minor player in the story of Jesus Christ.

The king we know and love is the one born in a barn. The king we follow is the one who fled as a refugee. The king we aspire to imitate is the one who was dedicated to liberty, justice, hope, and healing for *all the people*. The king we are counting on in life and death is the one who forgave *everyone* in the hour of his death.

In this overlapping generation at the turn of the first millennia, we can look back and see two *very different men* who were identified as king. And we can see—thank God—the indisputable power of love...and the victory this love brought through Jesus Christ, the king *of* kings and Lord of Lords.

Amen.

