

Why we need Christ the King Sunday (Luke 23:33-43; Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20)

The kings in the Bible feel pretty familiar.

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When I read scripture, I'm often struck by the feeling that I'm reading about people *I know*. In these writings from thousands of years ago, telling the stories of people in very different times and cultures, I see my friends and family, neighbors, co-workers, and myself. I read the story of Ruth, and I remember a college friend who was gutsy, warm, and fiercely loyal. I read stories of Peter, and I see a former neighbor who wanted to do the right thing but seemed to stick his foot in his mouth more often than not.

The kings in our holy stories feel pretty familiar, too. They are fearful, even paranoid, and they give mandates, shape policies, and build infrastructure in order to harm and diminish the people they see as threatening (Exodus 1:8-22). They use their power to benefit themselves, regardless of the injury caused to others (2 Samuel 11). They take actions that have serious consequences for others for no reason but to save face, and they are thin-skinned, impulsive, and vengeful (Mark 6:17-26; Matthew 22:1-14).

Sound familiar? Whether in stories relating the history of Israel, in the writings of the prophets, or in the stories about Jesus or the stories he told, the kings in scripture often sound like leaders we know, whether they bear the title of king or not.

The Feast of Christ the King was first introduced in the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI in 1925. I suspect I wouldn't share the exact concerns that inspired the pontiff,

but I do believe that celebrating the Feast of Christ the King continues to be a profoundly important witness in our time.

A few themes worth exploring:

I pledge allegiance. The Feast of Christ the King gives us an opportunity to consider how we live out our faith in the public sphere. None of our current political leaders cares if we call Jesus “King” or “Lord,” but Roman rulers and citizens in the first century took it as a serious challenge to the authority of Rome. What authorities, powers, and influences compete for our allegiance now? How do we enact our allegiance to the reign of Christ in our lives—as family members, co-workers, students and teachers, neighbors, and citizens?

We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. What does this mean? In his Small Catechism, Luther begins his explanation of nine of the Ten Commandments in this way: “What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that...” When I taught the Small Catechism in confirmation classes, students often questioned the idea of being afraid of someone you love. This led to rich conversations about reverence, trust, God’s power, and human love. In Jeremiah 23, the prophet speaks God’s promise to raise up leaders who will shepherd them so they “shall not fear any longer.” The same Hebrew word for “fear” that appears in Jeremiah 23—*yare*—is used in other places to describe reverence for God (Exodus 1:17, 3:6, and 14:31). It seems that fear is not what God wants for God’s people, and fear-mongering is not a characteristic of leaders who follow God’s ways. *Yare* as reverence describes right relationship with God, but not with human leaders.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken. In Jeremiah, God promises: “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.” In Colossians we hear, “For in [Christ] 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.” We live in a time when many Americans feel we are [more divided than ever](#) and view deepening divides with anxiety and concern. In the face of increasing polarization and fear, how might the promises we hear in these readings guide and challenge us as Christian individuals and communities? How does God “gather us in”? By seeking the lost, gathering the scattered, and bringing them into a place of safety. By reconciling all things to himself through self-giving love. How do we witness to the king who gathers through *kenosis* and solidarity—by entering into our world as a fragile infant,

crossing over boundaries, and reaching out in love?