

CHRIST THE KING IS A KING OF LOVE

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Virginia Beach VA 23452
John 18:33-37

Today is the last Sunday of the church year and is known as Christ the King Sunday. This is a Sunday when we celebrate Christ risen and on his throne as you see in many paintings and on many church domes especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. However this sermon took a definite turn away from the traditional beginning with the vestry meeting on Tuesday.

I used our Gospel for a bible study at the start of the meeting as we always do. Just a side note, I feel it is important to set the stage for every vestry meeting by praying and studying scripture. Without this, nothing we do the rest of the night means much of anything.

One of the vestry members after hearing the passage said, "I'm having trouble here. On the agenda tonight is discussion about our being an open, welcoming, affirming parish yet this passage seems so exclusive. This seems the opposite message of what we are going to talk about." This was a great observation and brings to mind first of all how we read scripture but also what kind of an image of Jesus do we have? What does Jesus mean to us as a parish and you as an individual?

First of all let's deal with the question of how we approach scripture. If you want stark contrast between two versions of Jesus' life and ministry contrast Mark, whose gospel we have been reading this year and John who we read from today. I mentioned last week that Mark was written somewhere around 70 CE. The temple had been destroyed, the 5 year revolt of the Jews had ended in total destruction of Jerusalem and the near annihilation of the Jewish population in that part of the world had occurred. It seemed that their world was ending and his gospel reflected that.

John's gospel written in the late 90s or late is written by a community possibly in Ephesus that has been expelled from the synagogues following the Counsel of Jamnia where the rabbis decided that any Jew who declared that Jesus was the Messiah was a heretics and barred from the synagogue. The world has not ended, the new church is truly becoming its own faith and there was great bitterness focused at the "Jews" in this gospel. For a modern analogy, think in terms of the embattled Palestinian Christian's relationship with the modern state of Israel. That is the level of hard feelings we see in John.

You see a strong we are right and you are wrong mentality. As often happens in this type of mentality only the members of the group are right and everybody else is condemned. We must read John with this friction in mind or we risk missing some beautiful and profound theology.

What this brought to mind is something I mentioned last Sunday in my presentation on the marriage debate. One of the great sins in my opinion that we see in the church today is this division into factions and denominations that fight with each other with the same nasty we are right and the rest of you are going to hell attitude. This is playing out in politics on a national and international level.

The Very Rev. Ian Markham, dean of Virginia Theological Seminary was the speaker at our Fall Clergy Day with the bishop. He did an exercise with us that I used last week at the beginning of the 9:30 presentation and I want to review that because it is so pertinent to the point I want to make today. There were about 80 clergy sitting in Flornoy Hall at Camp Chanco. He asked us about our beliefs on several key areas.

The first was the Trinity. He gave us the three most accepted views, the traditional catholic, creed based view, the traditional Protestant view and one from the Enlightenment. He asked us to raise our hands to state where our views were. The room was almost evenly divided into the three groups. Then we looked at the Eucharist. Again the three views of Catholic, something happens whether it is transubstantiation or consubstantiation, the Protestant remembrance meal or the middle view of the Enlightenment. This time the group was predominately in the catholic view although there were 10 with the remembrance view and 15 with the Enlightenment view. Finally he asked us about salvation. Again he presented the three views, the catholic which was consistent with Karl Rahner that all Christians are saved and Jesus will figure out what to do with the rest, the Protestant only Christians are saved and everybody else is going to hell and the Enlightenment view of all religions are equally valid as long as they lead to God. Once again the group was divided into all three camps although the send the non-Christians to hell was a very small group.

Ian then said, "Isn't it amazing that we can gather in this room with wildly divergent views of three basic foundational issues of faith and be in communion with each other. Nobody is threatening to walk out the door because of this yet bring up the ordination of women or LGBT issues people are ready to head for the doors in the Anglican Communion."

I firmly believe that the strength of the Episcopal Church and our parish is that in our diversity of views comes a unique unity because in that diversity we can all come to the table together. This is what makes for a truly diverse and welcoming congregation. We all agree that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. That is our core value.

This brings this sermon around to the question of what is your image of Christ? Is it someone sitting on a throne separating the sheep and the goats, sending those who have sinned in this short life to eternal torture and punishment in hell? Or is this the image of the man who healed the sick and reminded us that whatever we do for the least of these, the poor, the sick, the orphaned, the widow, the prisoner, the hungry you do for him?

I said this again to someone who came to my office this week concerned about the marriage issue and fearing division in our parish. I looked at him and said, "When it is time for me to answer for my life and ministry, when I see God or Jesus face to face, I do not want to have to explain why I excluded people from the table, kept them from knowing Christ in this parish. I would rather have to explain why I was so open and inviting to all of God's people regardless of their race, social position, political party, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

You see I believe that Christ the King is best described in the hymn The king of love my shepherd is. My image even on this day of Christ the King is that this King is the King of love. So let us know stand, open our hymnals to page 645 and sing the first verse of this hymn.