

## CHRIST THE KING SERMON – Ann Hodgman

Today is the Feast of Christ the King—a feast about which, until this week, I knew nothing except that there’s a Christ the King high school in Manhattan. Wouldn’t it be great to play for one of their teams? “CHRIST THE KING! CHRIST THE KING!”

Maybe it’s not surprising that Christ the King Sunday is unfamiliar to many of us, or at least to me. The feast didn’t come into being until 1925, when Pope Pius XVI wrote the encyclical *Quas Primas* (“In the first”). “We deem it in keeping with our Apostolic Office to accede to the desire of many of the Cardinals, Bishops, and faithful [ ...] by closing this Holy Year with the insertion into the Sacred Liturgy of a special feast of *the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. This matter is so dear to Our heart, Venerable Brethren, that I would wish to address to you a few words concerning it. It will be for YOU later to explain in a manner suited to the understanding of the faithful what We are about to say concerning the Kingship of Christ, so that the annual feast which We shall decree may be attended with much fruit and produce beneficial results in the future.”

“It will be for YOU to explain...” Thanks a lot, Pius!

I’m not sure I CAN help us understand this feast when I’m so unfamiliar with it. The idea of encyclicals stymies me. There’s something so arbitrary about it. “I’m infallible, and I’ve been thinking about this, and now I’m going to insert it into the calendar as a mandated discussion topic?” You certainly don’t have to read the whole thing to get the point: scold, scold, scold, scold, Jesus is in charge, etc. I would summarize the Encyclical’s central theme as, “Christ—not Mussolini or any other earthly ruler--has ultimate authority over everything we do. Believe it.”

I can definitely get on board with the reasons the Pope thought the feast was necessary. World War I, the War to End All Wars, had been over for several years—but where was the peace? Pius lamented “the seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities which still hinder so much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and *measure everything by these.*”

Discouragingly familiar. Like all complaints about the terribleness of human nature, this passage could have been written two thousand years ago. It could have been written yesterday. It certainly rings true. And, like all such statements, it seems to make no difference to the way we treat one another. But I guess we have to keep trying.

It took years for the Episcopal Church to adopt this feast. We only did so in 1970, and the feast was only officially added to the lineup in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. In various years Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians also came aboard. (I like to think of the various rectors and pastors shrugging and saying, “I already think of Christ as King, so why not?”) The feast’s timing is, I think, more instructive than its message. Originally, the Catholic Church celebrated it in October; it was moved to this Sunday in 1970 to mark the end of the liturgical year as the last Sunday in the season of Ordinary Time. It marks the last service of what is occasionally called Kingdom Season—the period between All Saints’ Day and the first Sunday of Advent. This Sunday we ponder Christ’s death; next Sunday we begin the preparations for his birth. Thoughts of the Crucifixion are meant to hover in the background of our joyful anticipation. The minute Christ is born we start marking the countdown to his death.

It's a lot of put onto an infant, but of course this isn't just any infant. This baby is born to carry the joys and sorrows of the entire world.

So today, the end of our liturgical year, we emphasize Christ's role as the ruler of all creation *and* his final end. As the Dutch theologian Henry Nouwen—HE IS GREAT, by the way. I almost wish I could turn over the whole sermon to him. N-O-U-V-E-N—look him up. Aaaaaany was, he wrote, “The greatest humiliation and the greatest victory are both shown to us in today's liturgy. It is important to look at this humiliated and victorious Christ before we start the new liturgical year with the celebration of Advent. All through the year we have to stay close to the humiliation as well as to the victory of Christ, because we are called to live both in our own daily lives.”

...Now that we have a little bit of background, I want to talk about today's Gospel. The context is important, but the text is even more important. I believe that in addition to his victory and humiliation, we're meant to think about his fear and the courage he shows by refusing to give in to it.

We're near the end of John's Gospel. Jesus has already been grilled by the Jewish high priests Caiaphas and Annas, who are both determined that he should die. But they're unable to settle a charge on Jesus and so bring him before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate has the power to execute criminals, but he needs a specific accusation in order to do that. And there isn't one.

Pilate doesn't want to have this challenging conversation. He too wants Jesus dead, but he doesn't want to be responsible for the death. He's just casting around for a way to put Jesus on the defensive.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks.

Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he puts a question to Pilate, which must startle the Governor. How many accused prisoners ask *him* questions—and hard ones at that? “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” says Jesus. This is very lawyerly of him. He means, “Are you asking me this question as an official of the Roman Empire, which sees me as a threat to stability? Or did you hear it from my followers, in which case we're talking about a totally different meaning for 'king'? Define your terms.”

“Am I a Jew?” Pilate asks in turn—another rhetorical question, meaning “How should *I* know anything about you? *YOUR* guys are the ones who handed you over.” Pilate is already in over his head here. To make matters worse, the Jewish leaders won't come inside the Governor's headquarters because it would defile them for the Passover. On some level, Pilate must find this insulting. “We're too pure to sully ourselves by entering your place of business.” Pilate has to go outside if he wants to ask them any questions. Imagine his frustration! He can't get a straight answer out of Jesus, he doesn't know what Jesus is supposed to have done, and he has to keep running back and forth between Jesus and his accusers. He must be tearing his hair out.

Well, Jesus doesn't give him any help. Once again he answers elliptically. “You say that I am a king”—meaning “King is your word, not mine.” Jesus is simply not interested in parsing out the meaning of “kingship.” “For *this* I was born, and for *this* I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” There's a little dig here, the implication that “If you don't listen to me, you don't belong to the truth.” Even a seasoned politician would have trouble swallowing that.

I'm not going to embark on discussion-group-type questions about truth. What blows me away here is the characterization of Pilate and Jesus. John is a great, great writer.

Jesus knows he's about to be put to death. True, his own followers and not Pilate will be his killers. Even so, Pilate *could* keep Jesus alive if he wanted to.

Now, if I were somehow in Jesus's position, verbal jousting would be the last thing on my mind. *All* I would be thinking is, "Maybe there's still a way to turn this around.

What can I say that will save me?" But Jesus refuses to stoop to that. Right up to the end, he's going to stay consistent. This Gospel is a masterpiece of characterization.

There's no action and no adjectives—nothing but dialogue, and what revealing dialogue it is.

"What would Jesus do?" is always a good question, but here the question is, "If I were in Jesus's place, what would *I* do?" Could any of us possibly be that brave? Could we keep our head as Jesus does? When my sister turned 45, she said with relief, "Now I'm old enough to know I probably can't be tortured." When my daughter was in college, she realized that she often thought, "I'm going to *hate* prison"—as if this terrible fear might have been inescapable. I myself frequently wonder whether I would actually have the guts to die for my faith or my politics. Maybe so, if the death were an easy one. But these kinds of thoughts are like touching a bruise. They're not real.

Let's pay attention to Jesus's composure here. He's walking the plank. He's at the very edge of death. But he never loses his cool.

Christ the King indeed.