

*The Last Sunday after Pentecost (Christ the King)
Proper 29, RCL Lectionary*

November 23rd, 2008

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*Jesus for President?
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As we have grown in recent weeks at our ten-o'clock service, you've probably noticed that worship takes a little bit longer – especially communion. It's one of those unexpected challenges of growth, and it presents a dilemma important enough that I took it into conversation with some clergy colleagues this week.

Here was a piece of their wisdom:

A story goes that a faithful church-goer was sitting with her inquisitive four-year-old son in the pew one Sunday morning. As the procession began, her son asked:

“Mommy, what does it mean that those people are wearing white robes?”

With a great deal of seriousness, she explained to him that acolytes, lay assistants, and clergy wear white robes because white robes represent the purification of baptism and wearing them was the ancient practice of the church. And didn't it look nice all of them standing in white around the altar together!

“Mommy,” he asked as the procession came past their pew, “what does it mean that the lady is carrying a red book way up high?”

His mother explained in hushed tones that the deacon carries the gospel book lifted high because the Gospel is very important in the Christian community.

“Mommy,” he asked as the liturgy of the word began, “what does it mean that people are bowing to the big table when they go read the story?”

His mother instructed him patiently on the importance of the altar, and that their bow showed respect for the altar and, most importantly, for God.

“Mommy,” the boy asked as the deacon came forward with the torch-bearers to read the gospel, “what does it mean that they carry candles?”

His mother told him in a whisper that before electricity, Christians needed candles so they had enough light to read the Bible. And the candles also bring light in the darkness, just like Jesus.

As the priest ascended the pulpit to preach, the boy turned once again to his mother.

“Mommy,” the boy asked, “what does it mean that the man in fancy clothes is checking his watch?”

His mother sighed. Exasperated, she replied, “Absolutely nothing!”

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Today is the last Sunday of the church year – it’s been named, since the early part of the twentieth century in a number of traditions, “Christ the King Sunday,” and you probably hear that in our hymns and, to some degree, in our readings today.

Kings have an odd place in our history. Most of you who’ve delved into Anglican history probably know that Henry VIII casts a long and rather arrogant shadow over a good part of the beginning of Anglicanism. His notoriety is such, we should wonder why we use the language of kingship at all in our prayers. In fact, he’s a bit of an embarrassment – more than a bit, quite honestly. Then there’s that other king that got the boot politically in the American Revolution shortly before the founding of The Episcopal Church. Americans don’t have kings, which – I think most of us would argue – is probably a good thing.

I learned this week that even the name for today, “Christ the King,” has its own rather dubious origin. In 1925, it was instituted as a feast by Pope Pius XI in *Quas Primas*, an encyclical which declared that democracy and religious liberty were dangerous to the Christian faith. “Christ the King” was intended to usher in a temporal authority for the church over state affairs – an idea that the Vatican II Council later endeavored to downplay, but one that nevertheless still appeals to some of our sisters and brothers who desire a theocracy: one, I suppose, that would separate the goats from the sheep, in the language of this morning’s gospel reading.

As Barack Obama prepared was busy assembling his cabinet and furthering his family’s preparations for a big move and the inauguration in January, I read in *Newsweek* that some millennialist Christians have decided that our President-elect is the anti-Christ. It’s an apocalyptic title rooted in a reified reading of the Book of Revelation – a favorite American Christian proof-text if there is one. Declaring someone the anti-Christ appeals to many in challenging times like these. It gives us, in the metaphor of another biblical tradition, a scapegoat – someone to blame for all the ills of the world. In addition, it offers an odd sort of hope: that with the appearance of the anti-Christ, the end is near, the great cosmic battle is about to unfold, and we who follow such notions – of course – will be on the winning side with God. Is it a little nutty? The *Newsweek* article protested loudly that people who believe this *are not nuts*. I had a hard time figuring out whether the author of the article had his tongue in his cheek or not.

But nutty or not, this anti-Christ notion acts as a bit of a foil for Obama’s accolade as “The One” during the presidential campaign – a bit of a messianic hope that got projected his way, along with some language about his now-forming White House being the new “Camelot”. While I suppose there’s desire in some quarters for Obama, as President, to separate the donkeys from the elephants – as it were – I imagine Obama himself would agree with most of us that he’s neither the Christ nor the anti-Christ. Nor is he a king.

Like most of us ending up in leadership positions at some point in our lives, he's a fallible, and in many ways ordinary human being endowed with a rather extraordinary set of responsibilities. And he, like us, will not be perfect. With any luck, he won't pretend to be, either.

Maybe for us here this morning, a more sound American name for today would be "Christ the President." We can imagine the Son of God about this time vetting advisors – collecting his apostles – building a cabinet, getting the councils of the Church in order, and filling the heavenly courts, preparing to judge the nations. Of course, we all know in our right minds that Jesus would probably not win were he to run for President of the United States. He's probably much too radical for mainstream America, and he might get branded as a neo-socialist by one side of the political spectrum and a self-aggrandizing reactionary by the other. Thankfully, perhaps, our feast day ending the church year falls a little late for us to entertain the notion of "Jesus for President" with any degree of seriousness.

But like Jesus' ancient followers, our Messianic notions still have a romantic ideal of Christ the political ruler as the final arbiter of judgment, the One who will catch us doing the right thing and our enemies doing the wrong thing when he comes in power and triumph – whether as king or president, or both. The One who will get rid of the goats in our lives – or the donkeys or the elephants. . .or both. . .depending on what political side we happen to be on. The One who will, in short, bring order to our messy lives, messy politics, and a capricious universe. And maybe in the greatly anticipated ecclesiastical clean-up, he would even rescue us all from liturgies that run a bit longer than they ought. You never know!

But, my sisters and brothers, even in the face of hope that we utter again this day that Christ is coming to lead us – his sheep – back home. . . even in the articulation of our own sometimes rather selfish proclamation of our own salvation. . . we hear about the real work of the people of the Gospel, and the real political agenda of Christ the King, Christ the President, or whatever title lifts up our Redeemer in your hearts and minds this day. And that agenda is one of mercy: welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, healing and comfort for the sick, hope to the imprisoned. The politics of power, which we all adore whether we are living in a monarchy or a Jeffersonian democracy, are supplanted by a Savior who trudges into Jerusalem to be crucified. One who abandons all aspirations of power for the true freedom and redemption that comes with a Love: a Love that empties itself of life, and in rising again breaks the corrupt powers of domination in this world, freeing all of God's people. And as we will hear in the coming new church year, One who rather than be born in a great palace or the White House, instead deigns to be born a fragile, vulnerable child, poor and far from the center of any political power.

If Christ is any political figure at all, perhaps it might be said Christ is the anti-King, the anti-President – a cosmic and theological subversive who upends the selfish captivations of the human heart and replaces them with a new kind of power: power that flows from generosity rooted in love rather than ambition; from a courage that is rooted in peace rather than warfare. Our King, our spiritual President, begins here in the weeds, not in a palace. Here, closer to us even than the broken bread and the common cup. Here, where the oath of office is water poured over us in God's name. Here, where the crown is a heart broken. . .open. . .and transformed for eternal life.

Amen.