Sermon, November 24, 2024
"Poor Little Mary's Boy"
Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

In the wake of World War I, a war that produced death and destruction unlike any the world had ever known, God seemed to be losing ground to the work of tyrants and the powers of nationalism and secularism. Pope Pius XI established Christ the King Sunday in 1925 to counter what he regarded as the destructive forces of the modern world: secularism in the west and the rise of communism in Russia and fascism in Italy and Spain, harbingers of the Nazism soon to seize Germany. Pope Pius intended to oppose the rule of Christ to the totalitarian claims of these ideologies. At first it was celebrated nearer to All Saints' Day, for it is Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth to whom the saints pledge their loyalty and from whom they draw their strength. In 1969, the feast was moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year as a sort of climax, the vision of Christ to which the rest of the year points. The festival now proclaimed Christ as "the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of humankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations,". The three gospel readings chosen present Christ as the Son of Man coming in glory, confronting the rulers of this world, and reigning from the cross. With this new biblical emphasis, many branches of Lutheranism adopted this day in the 1970's. Our Episcopal Church has some ambivalence. While not designated in the Prayer Book, we use the scriptures mentioned, a collect borrowed from the Catholic rite and mention it on most calendars. But this dissonance has more to do with the theme itself. Then main question being: is Jesus a King or not and what kind of king?

Delores Williams, theologian and teacher, grew up in the South and remembers Sunday mornings when the minister shouted out: "Who is Jesus?" The choir responded in voices loud and strong: "King of kings and Lord Almighty!" Then, little Miss Huff, in a voice so fragile and soft you could hardly hear, would sing her own answer, "Poor little Mary's boy." Back and forth they sang: KING OF KINGS, Poor little Mary's boy. Delores said, "It was the Black church doing theology." Who is Jesus? "King of Kings" cannot be the answer without seeing "poor little Mary's boy." The images clash. One is big and powerful, the other small and poor. Christ the King Sunday is a dissonant day. Some congregations have changed the name to Reign of Christ Sunday to avoid the male image of "king." But that doesn't make much difference if we forget that Jesus is "poor little Mary's boy." The ancient creeds got something right when they remembered Mary

and Pontius Pilate almost in the same breath. Though "king" is male, the word is important because Jesus turned that word on its head. This king is in handcuffs, standing before Pontius Pilate who has the power to condemn him to death or set him free.

Here's Frederick Buechner's take on Jesus before Pilate.

WHEN JESUS SAYS that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, "What is truth?". Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody. Pilate asks "What is truth?" and for years there have been politicians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, poets, and so on to tell him. The sound they make is like the sound of crickets chirping.

Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question. He just ***stands*** *there. Stands, and stands* ***there****.*

Remember that image which we'll get to later but let's explore more what kind of king Jesus was and is now. Our best source is the gospels we've been hearing since last Dec. 3. What kind of king have we seen?

We've seen him call sinners and outcasts, friends and disciples. We've seen him heal hurts that no one else would dare touch. We've seen him bundled in the straw of a stable, on the dusty streets of the city, riding on the back of a donkey, standing trial in the palace of Pilate, hanging on the wood of the cross. All year long ... time went by so quickly, and yet it was so full. Where did we see our King in the days and weeks and months of our own lives, our own stories? Was he, perhaps, in the compassion of a friend? The kindness of a stranger? Was he in the comfort offered to a grieving family, the conviction of someone arguing a just cause?

Where will we see Christ our King in the year ahead? ...Christmas is just around the corner. Jesus is coming, tender and mild. But first, Christ the King Sunday reminds us of a different day in the life of Christ: the day he hung on the cross with a sign nailed above his head proclaiming him "King of the Jews. It's easy enough to proclaim our love for the baby in the manger, but loyalty to this King on the cross—to this Prince of Peace—upends all the ways of the world as well as our very lives and comes with no promise of earthly comfort, wealth, or power in return.

Where will we see this strange king? We see Jesus engaging in deep theological conversation with a Samaritan woman who had had five husbands and was living with a man who wasn't her husband! We see Jesus bending down on the ground to be with a woman accused of adultery. He leans in close to hear her voice when nobody else bothered to listen. We see Jesus putting a towel around his waist and then kneeling on the floor to wash his disciples' dirty feet. Jesus is a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. Even today, we see Jesus in tent cities where people live together after losing their homes to foreclosure. We see Jesus in public housing where people are still waiting for the power to come on after the storm. We see Jesus in shelters where women have sought refuge from abusers. If we would see Jesus, we will look in places kings seldom go. This kind of place is depicted in this painting by artist, Hannah Hammond, who painted a series of upside-down trees, one to accompany each beatitude, and wrote a blessing to remind us that Jesus upended our expectations of what it means to have a good life and our expectations of who will receive his kingdom.

These trees are rooted in the kingdom of heaven. "Instead of growth as an endless race to the top," Hannah said, "Christ invites us to grow down in humility, generosity, and self-sacrificial love." Our tender roots are exposed—even imperiled—by this way of growth. It is risky to thus reach for the heavens, to follow Jesus in his humility, generosity, and self-sacrifice, to be loyal to no one but Christ our King. And yet it is the call of Christ, echoing throughout Scripture. Jesus before Pilate, wordless - both humble and strong. Christ the King and poor Mary's boy. King of a kingdom of justice, love and peace; one unlike this world has ever known. Claim your citizenship in that kingdom.