

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 24, 2024

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

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Thou Art the King of Glory, O Christ

What have the great reredos of Saint Thomas Church and the Fifth Avenue façade have in common?

If you stand on Fifth Avenue and look up at the Rose window, you will see above it, incised with large letters, these words:

Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.

They are words from the canticle ‘Te Deum’ which is known as *The Song of the Church*. And, indeed, the fifth avenue façade of Saint Thomas is an image of the church with its 37 statues of individual saints (if you include the four on the tower) and the four living creatures that, traditionally, represent the four Gospel writers.

Now, come inside, and look at the great reredos – there, our eyes are drawn upwards to the image of Christ the King; ascended and glorified which seems to echo the words ‘*Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.*’ Jesus wears the trappings of kingly state – the royal robes, a beautiful crown, and in his left hand he holds the orb. Thus, surrounded by the saints and the angels he rules over his church.

But let us go back outside for a moment. Who presides over the communion of Saints that we see displayed there? The largest of them, after all, is a King – King Edward the Confessor – but it is not him. The words of the Te Deum give us a clue – “Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.” So we look for the image of the King of Glory as we see him on the reredos. Where is it? It is there, but it is not depicted in a way that those who pass by the church on Fifth Avenue would expect to see. For high above the saints in glory stands a calvary or *rood*; Jesus dying on the cross, with his Blessed Mother and the Beloved disciple keeping vigil either side. I am immediately reminded of the great office hymn for Holy Week, that Fr, Gioia used as the basis of his Good Friday meditations when he first arrived – “*Vexilla Regis prodeunt*” – The Royal Banner forward goes. That hymn is a direct reference to the imperial vexilla or royal standard used in the Roman Empire, but for the Christian,

the Vexilla Regis takes the form of a cross – Christ’s throne; the crown, a crown of thorns; the royal robe his own blood poured out on the cross for all to see.

So come back inside and look again at the reredos and the image of the ascended and glorified Christ who still has Mary and the Beloved Disciple keeping vigil. Look beneath the trappings of earthly

kingship – the precious crown and the orb; if we look closely, we will see that Jesus is also wearing a chasuble – the priestly garment which reminds us of his self-offering on the cross and his command to *‘do this in remembrance of me’* in the mass. But if we look even more closely, we will see that he is wearing something else under the chasuble – the dalmatic. The dalmatic is the ancient garment of the deacon and the role of the deacon is to serve – the first deacons of the church served the poor and the widows long before they ever had a liturgical function.

It is very significant to me that, with all the human trappings of kingly power, the image of the ascended Christ wears the garment of service to the poor. You will also notice that he does not have a scepter; instead, his right hand is raised in blessing...or could it be in judgment?

Earthly power, particularly expressed through kingship over thousands of years, is often expressed in subjugation of others; imposing one's will over others. But power in the Kingdom of God is the opposite of earthly kingship or sovereignty, for it is found in weakness and self-offering. On the cross, wearing the crown of thorns the people still cannot understand his kingship: *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”* (Luke 23:35b). Dying on the cross, Jesus denied himself the abuse of earthly power and, instead, redeems the thief crucified with him: *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”* said the criminal, and Jesus replied, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Our first two readings today give us visions of glory, of how God's sovereignty is over all the created order. They also give us a remarkable vision of how that created order is meant to be: From the Book of Daniel, *“To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”* And from the Book of Revelation, *“Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.”*

So let us look even more closely at the image of Christ the King on the great reredos, for there we shall see that his hand is still pierced – the wounds of love are still fresh.

This emptying of God into his creation brings about a new way of living; those of us who follow Jesus and his way know that the values of the Kingdom of God are not the values honored in this world. As Fr. Victor Austin once said talking about Christ's kingship, *“Jesus' ministry is a ministry of empowerment: he empowers people to become citizens, and the kingdom in which they become citizens is his.”*^[1]

Standing before Pilate, Jesus stands before the might of imperial Rome. Pilate is not a king, but he exercises power. Jesus, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, who presided over all that has been created, stands helpless and powerless.

Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. 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.”

To which Pilate famously responds, *“What is truth?”*

If we try to imagine that Jesus is a King in human terms, we cheapen the incarnation and the atonement. In fact, to do so suggests that the resurrection is a reversal of the passion; *“now,”* (we might think) *“he is going to get his own back!”* But what was the first action of Jesus in John's Gospel when he first meets his frightened disciples in the upper room? He showed them his hands and his side. His wounds are the key to his kingly power which comes through selfless love, the antithesis of human power and human kingship. *“My kingdom is not from this world,”* says Jesus.

Christ our King shelters with the asylum seeker; Christ our King lines up with the hungry at soup kitchens; Christ our King sits by the bed of a loved-one dying in pain; Christ our King weeps again for Jerusalem and for Gaza City.

“My kingdom is not of this world.”

“Thou art the King of glory, O Christ” – and yet our King reigns from a cross.

Our King raises his hands in blessing, but his hands bear the marks of the nails.

Our King hears us talk of who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but he welcomes the little children and washes his disciples’ feet.

Some words of Father Schultz that I find very moving:

It’s easy to ... make the kingdom into a sterilized and yet poisonous escapist fantasy of wealth and worldly power; losing sight of what it really means for Jesus to say “My kingship is not of this world;” losing sight of the reality of the cross – the reality of God’s love at the aching center of the world’s pain – our pain – sharing in it; suffering with it; God in Christ opening his heart to it – our violence – our sin-sickness to exhaust it all in his infinite life. ^[2]

References

- 1 It is often said that at Saint Thomas we don’t preach politics from the pulpit. And it is true that I and my colleagues would consider it a violation of the trust given to us to use this platform to tell you what to think about healthcare legislation or foreign policy or the licensing of taxicabs. But in a deeper sense of the word, we are always preaching politics. And that’s because Jesus was political. For to heal a sick person of disease or to drive away a demon is a political act: it restores to the person the capacity to participate fully in human society. Jesus’ ministry is a ministry of empowerment: he empowers people to become citizens, and the kingdom in which they become citizens is his. (Sermon preached on July 26, 2015)
 - 2 Sermon preached for BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship broadcast Saunday, November 24, 2024.
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