

Last Sunday after Pentecost, Feast of Christ the King— Nov. 26, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Jim O'Grady  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 100, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

In the capital of the Czech Republic, there is a remarkable complex of buildings known as Prague Castle. With foundations dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, it has been the seat of power for kings of Bohemia, Holy Roman emperors, and presidents of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. The castle grounds occupy an area of almost 750,000 square feet, more than 17 acres. It's among the most widely visited sites in Prague, attracting over 1.8 million visitors a year.

The most prominent building in the complex is the Roman Catholic cathedral of St. Vitus, the largest and most important church in the Czech Republic. Construction of the present Gothic cathedral began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its main patron was King Charles IV of Bohemia. He intended the cathedral to be a coronation church, a family crypt, a treasury for the kingdom's most precious relics, and the resting place and pilgrimage site of saints, especially of Wenceslaus, the kingdom's patron saint.

Among the notable features of the cathedral is a three-panel mosaic on the south façade, called the Last Judgment. Charles commissioned the work several years after being elected Holy Roman emperor. In the center bay, the enthroned figure of the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ is surrounded by ten angels. Portrayed beneath Christ are the figures of six saints of the Czech lands. Below the saints, the emperor Charles and his wife Elizabeth kneel in prayer. On the adjacent panels, Mary of Nazareth and John the Baptist face Christ in adoration. They in turn are flanked by the twelve apostles. The side panels also depict the resurrected dead— on one side, the just rising from their graves, assisted by the archangel Michael, on the other, the sinful, being driven into a lake of fire by the archangel. Thirty-one shades of glass can be found in the approximately one million pieces that make up the mosaic. It's part of the Golden Gate, the final stop on the coronation route of the kings of Bohemia, and until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cathedral's main entrance. It must have evoked both hope and fear for many of those who passed through it. It's thought by some scholars that Charles chose the mosaic's theme to emphasize the medieval Christian belief that a king ruled by divine favor. Anointed at his coronation, he was sanctified to render justice. This God-given power was the king's authority to judge his subjects as God judged them.

A common reaction of modern visitors to St. Vitus and Prague Castle is awe at the sheer scale and artistic expression. For people from countries with well-established secular, democratic traditions, there also may be wonder at the union of church and state which the site represents. But as you may recall from your high school world history class, it wasn't an absolute union. The investiture controversy pitted the authority of the papacy against European monarchies in the matter of appointing bishops, and led to war and excommunications. Depending on times and places, the balance between popes and kings shifted, but the connection endured.

The history of the papacy itself presents a glaring example of the nexus between religious and civil affairs. For eleven centuries the pope ruled not just in the spiritual realm, but in the physical, as temporal head of the Papal States, most of which comprised territory in central Italy. During the Renaissance, this involvement in the political arena even saw the scandal of the pope

leading troops into battle. 1861 was the beginning of the end of the Papal States, as the newly proclaimed kingdom of Italy conquered much of the pope's kingdom. What was left, Rome and its region, was seized by Italy in 1870. For nearly 60 years, popes refused to recognize the full authority of the Italian state. Finally, in 1929, Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and a representative of Pope Pius XI signed the Lateran Treaty, which created the world's smallest country, the sovereign state of Vatican City.

Pius XI has a connection with today's liturgy of the last Sunday after Pentecost, also called Christ the King Sunday in some churches. In the aftermath of the First World War, Pius wrote that when the noble impulses of patriotism are debased by extreme nationalism, it leads to injustice. Divorcing morality from practical life makes people forget that all of us belong to the same human family. He wrote about the kind of leadership that incited class conflict and partisanship. Rather than seeking to promote the common good, the pursuit of private interests and power ends up damaging the fabric of entire societies. Nearly a century later, these tendencies seem as persistent as ever. Pius proclaimed that true peace would only be found under the kingship of Christ as prince of peace. He championed the idea that laypersons could manifest the social teachings of the church through direct service to the poor and to those on the margins of society.

In 1925, Pius instituted the feast of Christ the King, a further response to increasing secularization and anti-clericalism on the part of governments. With the signing of the Lateran Treaty four years later, one result of Pius' pronouncements became clearer. His final renunciation of an earthly kingdom and a renewed emphasis on spirituality encouraged his fellow bishops to be more credible signs to the faithful—and to the world at large—in a time of great social change.

But what about scripture, the guiding light of the reformers, who rebelled against a royal church which sought, exercised, and abused earthly power? The scriptures which the lectionary gives us today provide many clues as to the nature of Christ's kingship. Ezekiel prophesied on the eve of a calamity: the downfall of the Jewish nation at the hands of a foreign power, exile to a strange land, and the eventual destruction of the temple, the dwelling place of the one true God. The prophet had preached God's judgment against the people, who had stopped listening for the voice of God, and had begun to worship false idols. In verses immediately before today's reading, the prophet also excoriates Israel's kings, shepherds who failed to feed the flock, failed to strengthen the weak, to care for the sick, to bind up the wounds of the injured.

But today's reading is one of consolation—the prophet invokes a God who is intimately involved with the people. Unlike many human kings, God will be a shepherd who gathers, leads, and guides the flock, who tenderly cares for the weak and wounded, and who nourishes them with impartial justice. Ezekiel uses the figure of King David to stand in for this leadership. But it isn't territorial conquest or the power to execute swift, cruel justice which defines this kind of kingship. For the prophet, David's royal status is given legitimacy by the image of the committed guardian of the flock; it's a willingness to be vulnerable with the vulnerable. It is the humbled, repentant King David who represents this kind of leadership. A few weeks ago from this pulpit, Frank Shirbroun reminded us that in the context of salvation history, the exercise of true kingship could take surprising forms. God's promises, seemingly abandoned, could be fulfilled in

unexpected ways. And all of us believers, as unlikely as we may feel ourselves to be, have a part in advancing the kingdom.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had some thoughts about what is necessary for true leadership and responsible citizenship. His last published book was called *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* That sub-title was especially pertinent to the late 1960s, when war and political upheaval seemed to put the country on the verge of chaos, while thoughtful, concerned citizens were attempting to build or preserve community. We might well ask, fifty years on, “where do **we** go from **here**?” In a speech echoing the book’s themes, Dr. King stated that “what is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

The balance of power, love, and justice in our world seems to be difficult to achieve. It often appears to be missing from both the actions of those who govern and those who are governed. Some may fantasize that God will finally step in to rescue us, sweeping away the inadequacies of human attempts to impose order on our endeavors. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians brings us back to earth today, even while using literally “lofty” language in referring to the risen Christ, scion of the house of David, enthroned in glory and ruling with power. The writer reminds us that Christ’s power is to be apparent in the life of the church, his body in the world. It should be noted that when we read further in this letter, there is no denial of deep human divisions, of the fragility of peace, of the presence of alienation and ignorance and callousness (C. Clifton Black). But in the message we hear today, the author makes explicit the connection between the faith of believers and love. It is a commitment in faith which makes God’s power available. Knowledge **is** power for believers. Knowledge of God’s love in Jesus impelled the early church to strive for unity among those who had previously been divided by many social and racial barriers. Today, we the church are still a necessary complement to Christ in the same work (Joseph A. Grassi).

This brings us to the gospel reading, with its depiction of the last judgment. But it’s not what the imagery at St. Vitus Cathedral would lead us to expect. Oh, there is Christ enthroned, and angels, and a group being divided in two. But no patron saints, no king/emperors or queens with mixed motives, no other symbols of national superiority or earthly might. Instead, there’s a comparison made to a rustic scene in which a shepherd separates sheep from goats. And the basis of the divine judgment to be rendered in this setting? Will it be our acceptance or rejection of church teaching? Will it be our oath of allegiance to pope or president, king or dictator? Will it be our standing, sitting, or taking a knee for a national anthem? Will it be our voting Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, or none of the above? Will it be our crossing of borders illegally or advocating for the building of a wall to keep out foreigners? Will it be our proclamation that black lives matter, or blue lives matter, or all lives matter? If any of these circumstances figure into divine judgment, it will be to the degree that they called forth from us either a loving response toward our fellow men and women . . . or, a response devoid of love.

If we focus on the dramatic elements of a last judgment scene (as did those who planned the mosaic in Prague), we may miss the fact that the passage from Matthew’s gospel is the moral core of the teaching of Jesus. It concludes the final discourse to his disciples; it is, as the great

Jesuit biblical scholar John McKenzie writes, “the last word.” Ministry to the basic needs of our fellow humans is the only basis of judgment mentioned in these verses. We are judged entirely on our behavior toward others, who are identified with Jesus; our behavior toward people is our behavior toward God. The theme of Matthew’s depiction of the last judgment is the identity of Jesus with humankind. It’s love that determines whether we’re judged good or bad. If our love is active, moral failings in other ways will be rare, and will be forgiven. Nothing can substitute for active love (John McKenzie).

But there’s a catch— active love cannot be calculating. Our attitude cannot be “if I do this, if I follow the rules, I’ll be with the saints, and won’t end up sharing the fate of sinners.” I hope you’ll forgive me, but because you can’t take Roman Catholicism out of the boy, I have to return to the words of the pope. In his letter instituting today’s feast, Pius XI wrote that Christ must reign in our minds, by our assent to revealed truths; in our wills, by our obedience to God’s laws; in our hearts, by our loving God above all; and in our bodies, by our being instruments of justice. Assenting to revealed truths may be the kind of traditional language which sounds chauvinistic in our time of pluralism and diversity. But the protestant part of me recognizes that the exhortation to allow Christ to reign in the mind, will, heart, and body is personal. Every member of the faithful is encouraged to let the kingship of Christ be active in our lives, that it not remain external and inert. Recognizing this kind of kingship removes the element of personal ambition or self-interest, allowing me to be more open and responsive to my fellow beings, no matter the given situation I find them or myself in. Today’s climate of public discourse sometimes makes the loving choice feel like a subversive act; to do the loving thing can seem like an act of resistance. Christ in my mind, heart, will, and body will prevent cynicism or political rhetoric from numbing me to the needs of the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the stranger, to say nothing of the needs of my own family or the communities I associate with.

The feast of the Reign of Christ is the end of our liturgical year. As modern people, perhaps annual ritual transitions don’t have the power they once did to cause us to take stock. With our stable, predictable lives, we may be far from any thoughts about a final reckoning, a last judgment. The last Sunday of Pentecost may not be the sort of ending that causes us to assess the behaviors we’ve engaged in, the choices we’ve made. But of course it’s a truism that **not** to choose **is** to choose. In contemplating scripture, history, and tradition, we can see that while power, love, and justice have often been distorted in self-serving ways, their true meaning and purpose are fulfilled in service to others. In the new church year beginning next week, opportunities to conform ourselves to Christ will be present, as they have always been, in all times. May our prayer be that we will recognize those opportunities, and choose to renew our commitment to be loving, active members of Christ’s body. In that way, the newborn Prince of Peace will find a place in our lives and continue to redeem the world.