

Christ the King
Matthew 25:31-46, Last Pentecost, Year A
23 November 2008
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

On the 9th of April, 1940, German troops flowed into Denmark in a relentless wave, proving more than a match for the Danish army. An ultimatum was issued: If the Danes didn't resist, the Nazis would allow the country to maintain its political autonomy. With no viable option, the Danish government capitulated, and while it was able to remain in place, its autonomy was a farce as Denmark became a nation occupied by the German army.

Three years later, Hitler's Final Solution followed the German army to Denmark. The Nazis ordered that all Danish Jews wear the yellow star on their sleeves as a prelude to their arrest and deportation. By then there was no question as to what this meant. Millions of European Jews had already been killed. In Copenhagen, which alone was the home of over seven thousand Jews, the king of Denmark was faced with an excruciating set of circumstances. The Nazi jackboot was already pressed firmly against the throat of Denmark. Daily peace was increasingly difficult to maintain. The king had millions of Danes for whose welfare he bore responsibility. If he would but comply with the Nazis' Jewish order, he might protect the rest of his subjects. But to do so, he knew, meant the sure death of Danish Jews. What was a king to do?

There is an Episcopal church in Memphis adorned with a number of enormous murals painted by the acclaimed artist John Henry DeRosen. The mural behind the high altar in the church is easily twenty feet high, and it depicts Jesus on the cross. Except this isn't like the Jesus you'd see on a crucifix or an Orthodox icon. This twenty-foot-tall Jesus is chiseled like Arnold Schwarzenegger during his Conan the Barbarian days. He has flowing blond locks and muscles that threaten to burst from his frame. To tickle this Jesus, if one could imagine such a thing, would be like tickling rocks. Cherubim, seraphim, and angels flock around him.

The mural is entitled "Christ Triumphant," and it clearly depicts Christ as *the king*. Given that today is the Sunday just before the beginning of Advent, which the Church declares as Christ the King Sunday, it begs the question: Just what do we mean when we say that Christ is king?

The artist who painted the twenty-foot He-man Jesus surely means something specific by his rendering, don't you think? His king is a muscular, even militant, one, one whom the viewer can imagine stepping down from the cross at any minute and leveling any and all opposition.

This is the same kind of Jesus we most often hear talked about in our common culture today, too. Think of our political cycles, including the one that's just ended. When Jesus is invoked, by anyone on any side, he is employed like a weapon. Jesus is used as a bulwark to defend and preserve the ways of life we already enjoy and fear someone will take from us. Whether by the late Jerry Falwell or Jeremiah Wright—or by any of us more common folk—Jesus is envisioned as the king who supports and justifies our views of the world—social and economic as well as theological—and indicts the views of others. He is a king on our side who demands conformity by his subjects, and woe be unto those who fail to fall into line.

And we don't have to look to politics to see this muscular king. Christian literature like the "Left Behind" novels certainly view Jesus this way. The Jesus depicted from any number of Christian pulpits in this city and others would offer the same.

But how does this image mesh with what we find in today's lectionary readings, which are intentionally assigned to the Sunday of Christ the King? Is the king depicted in these readings one who stands sentry at the gate allowing in only those who see things as we do, or who comes down from the cross to pummel those who differ from us in opinion and belief?

In today's Gospel, after weeks of reading parables that give us metaphoric images of the end times, Jesus finally provides his own literalistic vision of how things will be when time has exhausted itself, when he reigns as judge and king. For those of us so concerned with being right, with defending our way of thinking and being in the world, it's shocking that nowhere in Jesus' vision of judgment is belief mentioned *at all*. This Christ the King judges and reigns by only the criterion of mercy. To those who have shown mercy—feeding the hungry, tending the sick, visiting the imprisoned—Christ shows tenderness and mercy. To those who have failed to offer life, life is not offered. As one scholar says, "Nothing is said of grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What counts [in the reign of this king] is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people."¹

And looking at the Old Testament today, we find the voice of God promising not a militant, warrior king but rather one whose passion will be to seek out the lost, bring back those who've strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.

The king portrayed in these passages of Scripture is not the muscular king of the DeRosen mural. He is a king who comes down from his cross for the same reason he was raised upon it in the first place: to identify with, to be *in solidarity with*, all those who lives are

¹ "Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII, pg. 455.

experienced as clouded and dark. What would it mean to flock to the banner of such a king? What would it look like to follow him?

The king of Denmark was faced with a choice. If he acquiesced to the German demand that all Jews wear the yellow star, he might politically survive the war and rebuild Denmark, ultimately being hailed as the savior of the nation. Or, he might muster the remnants of his army and fight. Better late than never, and though his people would surely be annihilated they would become the stuff of valiant and heroic legend. A king must make such hard choices.

But this king, whose name was *Christian*, would not. He denied that the choices presented to him by the way of the world were the only ones. Instead, he chose the way of the king we are all called to follow, the king from which he took his own name. When asked what he would do in light of the Nazis demand that the Jews wear the star that served as a death sentence, King Christian said, “We’ll *all* wear it.”

It’s difficult to know where history ends and legend begins. Some accounts say that King Christian rode through the streets of Copenhagen on the day the order was to be implemented, vulnerable and without a military guard of any kind proudly and vividly displaying the Star of David on his own sleeve. What is known for sure is that almost all of Copenhagen’s seven thousand Jews were hidden by Danish gentiles and then aided in their escape to Sweden on fishing boats, rafts, and anything else that would float. What is known for sure is that Hitler, the personification of both militant power and evil if ever there was one, grew to despise King Christian with unmatched loathing, but somehow the King’s response rendered Hitler impotent to act against him.

And Christ the king comes down from the cross to rescue those who have been scattered on days of clouds and thick darkness, to seek the lost, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak.

Despite what many might claim, Christ does not fit the mural of a muscular and militant king, who launches assaults on our enemies and defends our ways of belief and life. No. Christ is the kind of king who will come down from his cross with scarred wrists and ankles and wear the yellow star, if it comes to that, even for *you*, no matter how dark your days may be. He will seek you out, binding your hurts, strengthening your weakness. And most importantly, to be subjects of this king he asks before all else—including belief—that we do so for one another and for all his children in the world.

Amen.