Last Pentecost – Christ the King 2026 – Westfield and North Brookfield

This last Sunday after Pentecost, the last Sunday in the season of "Ordinary Time", is sort of like the Church's New Year's Eve.

We're getting ready to turn the page in the Christian calendar year and start again, as Advent begins next Sunday, with the cycle of remembering the birth, the life and teachings, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

It is Christ the King Sunday.

Rather like New Year's Eve, it directs us, before we begin again, to remember where we've been in this last Church year, directing us to

- **The living presence of God that we have known in the world in the person and life of Jesus, and**
- **The Christ, who was resurrected and alive again for the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion**

This Sunday declares that Christ is now and forever the center and the sovereign of everything that is, that Christ has dominion over everything that is, in our lives and in the life of the entire universe.

It seems like Christ the King Sunday must be an ancient symbol in the life of the Church, but it is in fact a 20th century invention. It actually has a political origin that remains relevant for us today:

Pope Pius XI instituted "Christ the King Sunday" in 1925 – while Europe was struggling in the political and economic aftermath of WWI – to remind Catholics that their first allegiance must be to Christ, their spiritual "King", rather than to the earthly and political authorities dominating their headlines.

The Society of Saint John the Evangelist in Cambridge sends out a "Word for the Day", with a daily quote from one of the brothers' sermons. Here is one from Brother Geoffrey Tristram, suggesting how we might think about Christ the King Sunday:

Tomorrow we celebrate Christ the King. It is a chance for us each to look back and ask ourselves some searching questions: During this past year who has been my king? Whom have I served, through my words, thoughts, and deeds? To whom have I paid allegiance? Who sits on the throne of my heart? Here is an invitation to choose Christ again.

***

I want to share a story which is, for me, a very fond memory. It's not a spiritually enlightening story, but it's one that I remember each year on Christ the King Sunday.

It's is simply about our common humanity and I suspect that all church people will hear it with sympathy.

When the former parish that was St. Andrew's, Turners Falls, for which I was the Priest in Charge was preparing to merge with St. James, Greenfield, to become the James and Andrew that it is today, one of the things that we were thinking and talking about was what we wanted to hold onto from the two original parishes, going into the merger.

The leadership in Turners asked members of the congregation what would be important to bring along with us. Again and again, the answer was "the cross". I don't know how many of the congregation noticed, but because of the answer we heard, in the week before the Sunday on which the congregations merged, we transported the cross from St. Andrew's across the river and the sexton installed it on the front wall to the right of the altar at St. James, where the new, combined parish was taking up residence.

During the service on that first Sunday, a member of the congregation overheard a conversation in the pew in front of her which she later repeated to me. Two elderly sisters, matriarchs from St. Andrews, were sitting together. One turned to the other and said "Look, Doris. They have a cross like ours!" Doris replied "Yes, but ours is bigger."

The cross that came from Turners Falls is a *Christus Rex* or Christ the King cross – a different cross from most crosses we see in Episcopal and other Protestant churches, and different from the crucifixes we would see in many Roman Catholic churches.

On the *Christus Rex* cross we see the figure of Jesus, dressed In the robes of a king. The meaning that the *Christus Rex* points us toward is that the Jesus who died on the cross was, by his very submission to the powers of the world, transformed into the Christ who we, his followers, could understand to be the center and the eternal sovereign of the universe.

Lots of Christian commentators in recent times have written about the symbol of "Christ the King" not being meaningful and helpful to us in the modern world, and particularly in a democratic society where we reject the authority of monarchs. Many Americans in the last year or two have made this clear.

<u>But this is really just the point.</u>

The Kingdom over which Christ reigns is not the kingdoms of the human world.
The kingship of Christ is not the kingship we associate with the human kings, who can unilaterally impose their will over the lives of their subjects.

- Jesus as Christ redefines kingship;
- Jesus as Christ redefines power and redefines authority

Christ as king serves God's vision, not human agendas.

- Jesus Christ is the king who dies on a cross
- Jesus Christ is the king who gives up his life for us and asks us to

remember him when we share the bread and the cup

- Jesus Christ is the king who, rather than instilling fear, gives us the Good News of God's Love that can set us free from fear
- Jesus Christ is the king who rules by showing us how to love and serve one another.

****

So how does this speak to our lives? This is always the central question we need to ask when we encounter the gospel.

Christ as King directs the way we can live when we remember that God's Reign is not the same as the kingdoms of this world.

This Sunday's gospel text from Matthew is the Parable of the Last Judgement, an allegory in which the Son of Man, portrayed as a King on a throne, pronounces judgement on the nations who appear before him. Separating the nations as a shepherd would separate sheep from goats, the Son of Man divides the nations before him into those who have showed mercy to their human siblings, by feeding, clothing, welcoming and visiting those in need, from those who did not.

I remember the way that I originally understood this passage, the way that I think it was traditionally interpreted for many generations. I think about the parable differently today, and I invite you to join me in reflecting on ways in which our thinking needs to change.

This parable has been traditionally understood as something that happens after we die, whether we've imagined the judgement as taking place shortly after our deaths, or at the Second Coming of Christ, at some undetermined point in the future, when judgement is pronounced on all of humankind.

The word in the parable that describes those appearing for judgement is the Greek ἔθνη, (*ethnay)*, the plural of *ethnos,* from which we get the word "ethnic". It is the nations who are judged, not individuals.

Further, I invite you to consider that just as Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven were not about some realm of the future, outside of the world we live in, but about the way we treat one another in our day to day lives, the judgement that matters is of ourselves and our communities and our nation now, rather than in some far-off reckoning in the future.

And finally, while the simplicity of parables can be helpful in making a point, all of us know that none of us, and none of our nations, are solely either sheep or goats. We are complex beings forming complex communities shaped by history and emotion as well as rational and practical considerations. None of our hearts are pure, or evil. And John's gospel assures us that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

The world we are living in is so deeply troubled and deeply troubling.

Christ the King Sunday calls for us to take the long view, and to have faith that, despite immediate appearances, all things are moving toward fulfillment in Christ, in the Word and Heart of God.

Knowing that Christ is King frees us from the claims of the world, frees us to do the work that God has given us to do, which is why we're here –

- To feed the hungry
- to clothe the naked
- to welcome the stranger
- to be kind to and forgive one another.

Who has been my king? Where does my allegiance lie?

As we ready ourselves for a new year, as we ready ourselves to start over, let us hear and accept Brother Gregory's invitation, and choose Christ.

Amen.