



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 21, 2021
Christ the King

Solemn Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Zechariah 9:9-16 and Luke 19:11-27
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Behold thy King

“Behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation.”
In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It's easy on the Feast of Christ the King,
with all of this talk of Kings and Kingdoms
it's easy to imagine Jesus arrayed in rich and dazzling attire,
gold and precious jewels everywhere
our Lord seated on a great throne,
surrounded by saints and angels.
dazzlingly and supremely powerful.
almighty, in fact.
serene, majestic,
far above the turmoil of the world.
It's easy to imagine all of that royal splendor.
And to think: we've got it.
We know what it looks like, the Kingship of Christ.
We know what it is.
Because it's what we already know power looks like.
Except...better. More beautiful. More grand. And possibly, if not probably, more tasteful.

There is a bit of a problem here, though. Or rather: a mystical challenge.
Thinking divine power in terms of earthly imagery
doesn't quite do justice to the divine, regardless of our imaginative or poetic powers.
The infinite majesty of God is not something our mortal minds can manage to depict.
And, more often than not,
we find ourselves thinking the divine attributes, like power, in distinctly human terms,
as if the energies of divinity were all the things we know their created analogues to be
but more of it, and in a higher register.
and the difficulty isn't just the limits of our imaginations
but the direction in which we imagine.
Because it's not the case that God is powerful or majestic like a King, only more so:
rather, it's the case that the power and majesty of a king

is a poor, pale, and paltry shadow of the Glory of God,
all earthly splendor an obscure and dark reflection of a heavenly glory.
We're not meant to extrapolate up from earthly rulers
in all of their brokenness
to discover what God is like as King:
we're meant to measure all human rule by the incomparable rule of God,
--to learn from relationship with the Prince of Peace, the Just one, the Saving one,
who gathers us, feeds and tends us as his flock,
who considers us the jewels of his crown and the banner of his reign,--
we're to learn from God what rule what real justice is and means
and measure all earthly rule by it, by the degree to which the earthly participates in the divine.
yes, we may be able to get some scattered and broken glimpses
of the Central Secret Fire of Divine Love
through reflected rays and lesser flames,
but we must always be on our guard not to confuse shadow for substance.

Because, in the end: words fail. Our imaginings fail.
Royal splendor fails.
The tropes and trappings of worldly glory:
in the end, they're all insufficient.
And the challenge on this Christ the King Sunday
is not to be ensnared or enticed by our beautifully insufficient and insufficiently beautiful
imaginings of the kingdom.
because if we are so enticed, if we take the shadow for the real
then Our King becomes just another Tyrant, only more richly attired in that Light Inaccessible;
and our Kingdom becomes just another nation,
only more amenable to our own prejudices and preferences;
and the vision of grace does not confront, provoke, question or transform us
but is made to merely comfort or assuage us.
The Real becomes a fantasy.
And it becomes easy, then,
in thrall to our earthbound imaginings of Kingly Splendor and Power,
it becomes easy to miss the marks of Love
on the Hands and Feet and Side of Our King.
Easy to ignore that the radiant crown on his head
is a crown of plaited thorns, it's red jewels not rubies
but drops of Jesus' own precious blood.
His face, the face of our King
the face of an unhoused migrant executed by the Roman state.
The throne from which he rules a cross,
His Power: Love. His majesty: Love. His Beauty and Glory: Love.
And this image: of the Eternal King who reigns Love-Wounded from the Tree,
this paradoxical image is meant to challenge and undo in us
all of our preconceptions of God's power, rule and reign
And pitch us toward a mystic contemplation in which, by an infusion of grace,
we are invited to receive not another image
But a new imagination.

We need to keep all this in mind when we encounter our parable from Luke this evening.
Because there's something we assume is just there, implied in the text that emphatically isn't
that the text actively resists if you look at it.
First: consider where it is in Luke.

Just before it, the wealthy Zacchaeus has committed his life to God's kingdom, and Jesus says: "This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

After this parable, Jesus plans his entry into Jerusalem, riding in humbly on a colt, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, his face set towards his passion, whereby he will consent to suffer human violence rather than inflict divine wrath on us and reveal once and for all that God has no part in our death-dealing, but desires to unpick our death from the inside of the human experience so that we might receive the fullness of his endless life.

This is the context of the parable: our humble king, readying himself to die our death, to save that which was lost.

But how often do we read this parable in precisely the opposite direction?

How often

do we read this parable

and think that tyrannous slave-owner is a metaphor for the loving God?

How often have we read in John 15 that Jesus calls us friends

because he refuses to call us servants,

only to insist or even suspect, like the third servant in the story

that God is "an austere man that taketh up what he layeth not down and reapeth what he did not sow"

which is to say, excelling at extortion and usury, cruelty and injustice.

The figure of the master in the parable is not an image of God:

it's an image of the tyranny and cruelty with which Jesus' audience was already so familiar

(unjust landlords, bosses, judges, venal Herodian kings,

power-crazed governors and Roman Emperors pretending to be gods—

in fact, that whole introduction to the parable

about a king going elsewhere to receive the kingdom

recalls the cruel and venal Herod Archelaus, son of Herod the Great,

who sued Caesar for rule against the wishes of his family and his subjects).

It's all an image of the tyranny and cruelty with which we, too, are familiar

and which, inexplicably, we are content to figure as an image of the Divine Lover of Our Souls.

When the master in the parable says the equivalent of: let the haves continue to have,

and the have nots continue to have not,

let the rich stay rich and poor stay poor,

How can we think that this, which is clearly how the death-broken and sinful world goes,

is also how God goes or desires the world to go?

How quickly do we forget

that God in Christ emptied himself for our sake

and became poor that we might become rich in grace?

Jesus' critique here, in this story, is that we don't know what the kingdom really is

that we need to stop insisting that we do.

And his plea here, is this:

my friends, he says, you are so willing to take risks

for and in the name of things of wrath that lead you to perdition and death

you are so eager to pursue the approval and the accolades of tyrants

whether they be powerful people or powerful passions or powerful patterns of thought

You don't realize that all of that is literally destroying you.

If you imagine that striving for the approving embrace of those who abuse and degrade you

is so worthy of your effort

if you imagine that devotion to a tyrant can make your life better,

imagine the difference in your life and in the world around you

That a devotion to someone who actually likes you

loves you

can do.

Imagine what using your gifts for someone whose favor you cannot earn

but which you already have

as a free gift of love

imagine how using your gifts for this sort of person

can transform you and the world around you

imagine how the grace of the one who knew your name

from before the foundation of the world

can work in you by the power of the Cross

to un-create the structures, systems and institutions of sin, of death and oppression

which work contrary to the will of God in the world

and contrary to the flourishing and fulfillment of all people.

Imagine being led by God's own Spirit of love

from fear, from death, from darkness, from sin,

into being fully alive.

Imagine risking everything

for love

daring to love with God's own fierceness and exuberance,

imagine living a life that is itself a sign

that the Reign of Death is over

that the Day Star, even now

is dawning,

that the Kingdom of Love

is at hand.

Imagine being servants of the sort of King who calls you his friends,

and who loves you more than his own life.

This is the King we own as ours today,

no earthly monarch can compare,

[Who receives from us a crown of thorns,

In order to crown us with the starry splendor of God's own glory.]

To Jesus Christ who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, to him be all honor, power and glory with the Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.