

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
Christ the King Sunday, Proper 29, Year C  
November 20, 2022

### Liturgical Politics: Christ the King Sunday

I want to begin this morning by admitting that I did not expect to have as much fun as we have had this November and this fall in general. Today is Christ the King Sunday. We will get to that. Next week we begin Advent, which is a journey all its own. But we began this month with our All Souls' service on November 2nd. It wasn't exactly fun but it was certainly sacred. Then on All Saints' Sunday, we had a great time recognizing new members, baptizing and renewing our baptisms, and eating breakfast together.

Then last week, our Diocese of Western North Carolina celebrated its 100th birthday. Our delegation went to a special Eucharist and reception on Friday night. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, celebrated the service and our bishop, Bishop José, preached. He admitted that he was just the warm up act for Bishop Curry who would be addressing the Convention the next day and leading the revival on Sunday. And I have to tell you, I was so proud of this St. John in the Wilderness because there must have been around forty of us in attendance at Christ School last Sunday. Everywhere you looked in that field house you saw a member of this church. I reckon it was more than any other parish in our diocese which is simply amazing. Thank you for coming out. That service did not disappoint. I'm not sure if there is a recording of it, but I know there is a recording of Bishop Curry's Saturday address and, while he said several times that it was not a sermon, I think you'll enjoy it immensely. We will put it in our email for tomorrow. In fact, if you start the video at the 14th minute, you'll get to see – and I know you won't believe me so you really have to see it to believe – you'll get to see the entire convention delegation at about 10:30 in the morning, a bunch of frozen chosen Episcopalians, dancing and getting down. It was so joyful. I hope you will watch or listen to Bishop Curry's address from Saturday because I think it is especially fitting for Christ the King Sunday which we celebrate today and to which I now turn.

To that end, let me tell you a story. At my last parish, the youth program would do a spaghetti dinner fundraiser to help pay for our summer mission trips. We would sell tickets for it but we would also approach local businesses to donate items for a gift basket for our silent auction. If you have been to Colonial Williamsburg, you'll remember that there is Merchant Square right there with all of those restaurants so I could just walk around with kids from the neighborhood and ask businesses for a donation. I remember we approached one restaurant owner who was well known in the community. We asked him for a donation of some kind. He told us that they had a policy to not make donations to religious or political organizations. I then responded

quickly that I understood entirely and *I was glad he knew the church was a political organization.*

This Sunday marks the end of our Church year. It's like the New Year's celebration on the Church calendar. Each year during this week, we are invited to consider what it means to have Christ as our King. We are invited to remember how life in the Kingdom God under this servant-King is here already. We are invited to consider how we embody the politics of Jesus in our lives together as a church family.

On Saturday of last week, Bishop Curry talked about how Christians in this country seem to be engaged in rather shallow thinking when it comes to politics. We hang out on the surface so often where tribalism, demagoguery, and fear abound, rather than going deeper to the source of the one who created the human family and then destroyed the barriers that exist between us by making love the most powerful force in the universe. You see, we have got to go deeper as a church. We have got to go deeper as a country. We have got to go deeper as a human family to ground ourselves in the politics of this Jesus of Nazareth and his Kingdom – a Kingdom where compassion abounds so that the same sacrificial love of Jesus that had him forgiving his crucifiers starts pouring out through us to reconcile people to one another and ourselves to God.

Or let me put it to you this way: last Sunday at 10:00am, nearly a thousand people from all over these mountains gathered together for a church service in a high school gym. That revival was the most political thing that I have ever done. And you and me, what we are doing now in this liturgy, is political in the truest sense of that word.

We don't use words like King and Kingdom, Messiah and Lord, words like gather and reconciliation, just for fun. When else do you bow before someone? You don't exactly go around bowing or kneeling to people in your day to day life. We save those postures for royalty. Who do you kneel before except the very King of Kings and Lord of Lords? The church and our liturgy are about how we organize our lives, about how we find meaning and purpose, they're about the one to whom we are loyal, they're about creating a corporate unity with each other – those are all political ends.

It's hard for us to wrap our western minds around this because we have been taught that politics has to do with the state or with protecting the rights of the individual. Modern political theory first makes us all into disconnected individuals who are fenced in by laws so we don't get in the way of each other's individual pursuits. So, I get to do whatever I want as long as what I want doesn't have an unreasonable impact on you doing whatever you want.

And in modern western societies like our own, the Church is welcome to try to have political influence over the state. It's welcome to raise up Christian leaders to then enter politics in a

Christian sort of way. The Church is welcome to lobby in congress but we don't think of the Church as political in itself because politics has to do only with the state, with politicians, with voting, and especially – modern politics especially has to do with talk radio, celebrity political “experts” on TV, opinion shows. That's all just surface level stuff.

But what if Christ is our King? What if the Kingdom of God is our society? What if our politics are the politics of Jesus who came, as our collect said this morning, to end our division and our enslavement to sin, and to free us and bring us together under his most gracious rule? Oh, that sounds like Good News to me now.

Here are what the politics of Jesus look like:

- First, God gathers individuals together and makes them into a people, a body, a community. A Church is forming.
  - You see that in the Jeremiah reading today: “You've been scattered by bad shepherds but I'm raising up a remnant, a branch from Jesse's tree who will bring you back together.”
- Next, we hear in our Gospel today Jesus on the cross just doling out forgiveness and healing like anyone and everyone can have some – even this criminal on the cross? – God reconciles us to God's self with that love and then reconciles us to each other.
  - Our righteousness is granted to us by Christ taking on our sins, dying for us, and then being raised, restored and forgiven.
  - The barriers that exist between us fade away. Jew and Greek? It doesn't matter anymore. Male or female? It's not so important. Slave or free? Conservative or liberal? Black or white? Rural or urban? Pick-up truck or Prius? Pumpkin pie or apple pie? UNC or Duke? The barriers are gone because we are one in Christ Jesus.
  - Those are new politics. The one who was before all things and in all things, through whom all things were made, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell – this is all in our Colossians reading now – through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.
- Finally – and here's what I'm most excited about and then I'll stop – our liturgy is the continuing performance of the drama of reconciliation that we have in Jesus Christ.

- It's not just symbolic: we are here to share in the drama of our redemption that has already happened and inches closer each day to the completion of what is to come.
- The Eucharist is a foretast – or let's say it this way – it's an appetizer of the Kingdom of God.

Do you see what I'm saying? God gathers us in, redeems us, loves us, and fills us, then our liturgy enacts a politics of reconciliation in Christ that makes the Church a counter-performance to the politics of the world. This politics is evident in the very act of our gathering today. The Eucharist incorporates us into Christ's body and reconciles the baptized again and again, more and more, to God and each other.

There will always be reasons for us to be divided as human beings. There will always be leaders or ideologies who pit us one against another. The politics of western societies are going to bounce from one crisis to another.

But here – HERE – we kneel before our true King. Here we are gathered into a new people. Here we reenact the reconciliation of God as we reorder our lives with the one whose love is pure and generous and complete. Here and now we continue in the politics of Jesus by being his Church. Here and now we pray with this thief on the cross, saying, "Jesus, remember us when you come into your Kingdom." He has remembered us and his Kingdom is here.