Sermon **2 Samuel 23.1-7**
November 25, 2018 **Psalm 132.1-12**
Proper 29B: Christ the King **Revelation 1.4-8**
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD **John 18.33-37**

The official name of the feast we observe today, at least when it was originated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, through an encyclical known as *Quas primus,* was "Our Lord Jesus Christ the King". As has been the case with most papal encyclicals — that is, letters sent to the bishops of the Church, *Quas Primus* was written in response to the issues of the day, in particular the aftermath of World War I and the fall of many of the significant ruling families of Europe. Coupled with the post-war turmoil of Europe was an increase, globally, in secularism and nationalism, including, for you history buffs, questions of the relationship between Italy and the Papal States. The fundamental answer to all these problems, according to *Quas primus*, was to enthrone Christ as the true and universal ruler of all times and places. With all of the earthly powers failing, the Pope wanted to point to Christ, a king "of whose kingdom there shall be no end" (*Quas primas*, §5).

When Pius XI established the feast, it was placed on the calendar to fall on the last Sunday of October. There, it would immediately precede the (much older) Feast of All Saints. In 1969, however, Pope Paul VI changed the title of the feast to "Our Lord Jesus Christ King <u>of the Universe</u>", and changed the day of the observance to the last Sunday of the liturgical year. His intention was to make the eschatological importance of the feast clearer — that is, to point to Christ's second coming — or, to use the title of a favorite movie, the "Return of the King".

The entire "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, coincidentally, was on our television over the last three nights. In my conscious mind, it had nothing to do with the feast we're celebrating today; I only made the connection Friday evening. But clearly, for anyone who's watched the movies, or read J.R.R. Tolkien's books, the matter of "kings" is front and center. I don't suppose it's too much of a coincidence to note that Tolkien's masterpiece <u>also</u> was written during, and after, a time of great global conflict. Characteristics of World War II — lust for power and domination, the elimination of one "race" by another "master race" — both are undercurrents in the "Lord of the Rings". And, of course, the final installment of the "Lord of the Rings" is the "Return of the King" — when the evil powers of Sauron are finally defeated, and a new era of peace and cooperation is envisioned under the rule of Aragorn, son of Arathorn . . . and the hobbits can go home.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic and so, for several decades before he had finished the Lord of the Rings trilogy, he had probably celebrated, annually, the feast of "Our Lord Jesus Christ the King". I can't help but see in his work echoes of the New Testament expectation of the return of Christ, the vanquishing of all evil, and the establishment of a new realm. What's different from the resolution of the "Lord of the Rings" and our New Testament stories is that the "new era of peace and cooperation" is <u>more</u> than just envisioned. With the possible exceptions of some Tolkien fan clubs, there is little explicit expectation that readers of the "Lord of the Rings" will be so inspired by their engagement with those books and characters that they will go out

and make a difference — as I noted, the hobbits simply went home. That is definitely NOT the case with the followers of Christ the King.

That the citizens of Christ's kingdom had a mission is evidenced by the fact that the New Testament exists at all. Jesus' disciples took the message he taught, and the message that they believed about him, to the ends of their known world. They recorded their recollections of Jesus and their experiences witnessing to Jesus. Some of what they passed on were Jesus' call for Judaism's return to its core values of care for the marginalized. Some of what they passed on were teachings on how to treat one another. And some of their message was about the signs and miracles they had witnessed.

But those signs and miracles were not just the actions of some random wonder-worker; they pointed, at least for many in his Jewish audience, to a new world . . . what many saw as a messianic kingdom. Indeed, their claim that "Jesus is Lord" pointed to a different realm. And that claim had, for many who heard it, distinctly political overtones. You'll recall that Triumphal Entry was seen as a political, royal, act. The *Kyrie Eleison,* "Lord have mercy" that we sing or say was what crowds would shout as the emperor rode by. To shout that to someone else was understood to verge on the subversive. But, as we heard in our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus didn't really call for a violent overthrow of the dominant political system. His kingdom was constituted differently; it was in the world, but not of it.

Jesus established, quite literally, a new dominion, ruled not by some representative, but by the divine King himself. And its citizens had a quite specific set of "laws" to follow. In the words of *Quas primus,*

> The faithful, moreover, by meditating upon these truths [about Christ the king], will gain much strength and courage, enabling them to form their lives after the true Christian ideal. If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all [people], purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all [people], it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God. (*Quas primas*, §33)

Yes, following these laws may demand action that contradicts the laws of the state, or, at least, demand that Christ's followers work to change them . . . but, if so, the ultimate intent was to bring all people into a much more peaceful, just and equitable realm.

But, bringing all people into a more peaceful realm has another aspect, one that is indicated in our reading from the book of Revelation. John begins his letter by declaring that Jesus Christ, "made us to be a kingdom" — yes. But in the next phrase, he goes beyond stating our citizenship; he ordains us all: Jesus made us to be "priests serving his God and Father" (1.6), or in another translation, he has made us "a kingdom of Priests to serve his God

and Father" (The New Jerusalem Bible). John echoes here a similar realization about the Christian community made in 1 Peter (written about the same time), but also quotes Exodus 19.6 — another passage, with another covenant, which establishes the role of God's chosen ones.

The role of "priest", historically, has been relatively simple: priests are official ministers or worship leaders who represent people before God. They are mediators between humanity and God, helping those of us in this world make meaningful contact with the divine realm. Yes, priests have ritual functions and are knowledgeable in the laws of the religion. But those aspects of what priests do are subsidiary to their main role in bringing people into relationship with God. John, in Revelation, tells the members of the church that we are all tasked with that role, with that responsibility.

Early Christians understood their role as citizens and their role as priests to be complimentary. Their commitment to Christ and their living out of his teachings — spelled out pretty well in *Quas primu*s — brought many people to Christianity in a time much similar to ours. People were confronted by numerous philosophies and experienced insecurity in the ancient world — just as today. And the citizens of Christ's kingdom then acted as priests in many ways. They provided community to lonely people; they provided a sense of meaning to those who were adrift; they gave hope to the marginalized, caring for those who the non-Christian society might leave aside. By their being in the world, but not of this world, they helped bring thousands and millions into relationship with God, into citizenship in Christ's kingdom.

Today, we celebrate the exaltation of Christ as Lord of that new kingdom. Today, we celebrate the fact that the laws of that kingdom are greater than those of earthly realms. Today, we are reminded, too, that we are not only citizens of a heavenly kingdom with a responsibility to follow its laws, but that we are also — all of us — priests in that kingdom, tasked with using the gifts we have individually been given to bring others into relationship with our King. This is a challenge to us all, regardless of our age, our education, our income, our skills, our national origin. Christ, as King, asks us to look deep within for those resources and qualities that will enable us, you and me, to be priests in a new, peaceful, just and equitable realm. What will you bring to lay before the King?