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## *Sermon*

Sermon for Sunday, November 25, 2007  
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta  
The Rev. Canon Todd D. Smelser, Preacher

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, as we begin anew next week on the First Sunday of Advent. Our long Pentecost season ends today with readings that point toward the Kingdom of God. This Sunday is also known as Christ the King Sunday—the patronal day for our Roman Catholic neighbors across the street. In terms of liturgical history this celebration is rather a new innovation. In fact it was Pope Pius XI who brought Christ the King Sunday into the church's liturgical year in 1925. He was attempting to do several things, but mainly to advance the message of God in Christ over and against that of the political forces moving in the world at that time—people like Mussolini and Hitler, and the growing movement of fascism throughout Europe.

Today our liturgy began with the prayer that all the peoples of the earth may be brought together under the "most gracious rule" of Jesus Christ. Then we heard a strong rebuke from the prophet Jeremiah against those who misused their power in his time. As a witness to the events leading to the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile in Babylon, Jeremiah chronicled the last days of the southern kingdom of Judah. In today's passage the prophet denounced the leaders of Judah for misleading the people; but he also looks to a future when Israel and Judah will return from exile and be united once again under a King like David.

In the ancient Near East, and in Hebrew Scripture writings, the image of a shepherd is often used as a reference to kings and rulers. The responsibility of the shepherd was to protect the sheep from danger, just as a king was to insure the security and prosperity of the kingdom. Here Jeremiah pronounces God's judgment against the rulers of Judah whose faithlessness has resulted in defeat and exile: "It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away,." But in the days to come, the Lord will "raise up for David a righteous Branch" who shall reign with wisdom, justice, and righteousness. One day the exile will end, and God's people will be restored, for God, their shepherd, who neither slumbered nor slept, will be their protector and guide.

Religious leadership, it would appear, has always been a tricky enterprise. Old Testament prophets were always critical of religious folk who said one thing in public but then practiced an entirely different ethic in private. They were called by God to remind the rulers that God's justice was paramount, and that the needs of the poor were always on God's heart. Jesus himself never exalted himself in his ministry, but always pointed toward God, his Father, and toward the imminent Kingdom of God. Jesus often used the language of paradox and reversal to shatter the conventional wisdom of his time. In the Gospels Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or is like a woman putting leaven into flour. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is even for children, who in that time, were just beneath the visibility line. You cannot serve God and Mammon. You must choose whom you will serve.

While Jeremiah castigated the shepherds who led God's people astray, the kingship of Jesus was exemplified in the figure of the good shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep." Thus today's Gospel passage focuses on Jesus' experience on the cross, in which his full authority and power are revealed—as he died to save others and not himself. Jesus answers the criminal hanging next to him with an assurance of forgiveness and eternal life. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Thus salvation was extended first of all to a repentant criminal, who would now share eternal life with the

Lord. Jesus is a king like no other, and what distinguishes his reign is compassion and forgiveness. As Paul reminds us "Through him God's work of reconciliation on earth and in heaven will be accomplished, as God has made peace for us all through the blood of Christ. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

Leadership and especially religious leadership is still a tricky enterprise. When one takes on the mantle of ordained leadership in the Church, there are certain expectations that are normative. Unfortunately we continue to read about clergy whose own lives are far from exemplary, and who abuse their power in the church for personal gain or gratification. There are even bishops in our own church whose primary aim seem to be leading their flock away from our Church, in order to meet their own personal views.

One of my favorite books in this field remains Ronald Heifetz's LEADERSHIP WITHOUT EASY ANSWERS. It's not really about religious leadership but does have application to church life. In the chapter entitled On a Razor's Edge Heifetz writes, Exercising leadership from a position of authority in adaptive situations means sometimes going against the grain. Rather than fulfilling the expectation for answers, one provides questions; rather than protecting people from outside threat, one lets people feel the threat in order to simulate adaptation, rather than quelling conflict, one generates it; instead of maintaining norms, one challenges them. Later he writes, "The practice of leadership requires, first and foremost, a sense of purpose" "the capacity to find the values that make risk-taking meaningful." We don't really know when Jesus felt his call to ministry, although scripture clearly points to his own baptism as the beginning at least of his public ministry. But clearly by the time of Calvary, when Jesus publicly humiliated with two criminals on the cross, Jesus' purpose was clear. When Jesus forgives the repentant thief on the cross he is offering us a model for Christian leadership, not based on power, but on powerlessness, not based on the convention of the time, but on a new world order.

Marcus Borg in his book MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME, reminds us that images of Jesus matter, that there is a strong connection between how we think of Jesus and our ideas about the Christian life. There are scores of biblical images applied to the person of Jesus: Son of David; Bridegroom; Door; Lamb; Door; Mediator; Great High Priest; the Resurrection and the Life; the Alpha and the Omega. Somehow the image of Jesus as King, Jesus who was so clearly against hierarchical relationships, seem almost antithetical to his ministry. But when we think of Jesus in the context of wisdom" "so often associated with a truly effective ruler, perhaps we are closer to the meaning that the Church has given him. For it is wisdom, heavenly inspiration if you will, which makes Jesus different from all the others. He is a leader; yes even a King, whom we are able to follow, even to the cross.

Borg writes further about Wisdom in his book JESUS in which he speaks of the Broad Way and the Narrow Way. The Broad Way is the way most of us live most of the time. We have internalized the conventions of our culture, and our lives are driven by these values. But sometimes, like the parable of the blind person, sometimes it is sighted people who are blind. "You have eyes to see and fail to see." Says Jesus in Mark's Gospel. The Lords of Convention in Jesus day are the same as those of today: Family, wealth, honor and purity. They are the cultural values that most of us still value as being supreme. And yet Marcus Borg would say that the Narrow Way, the way that Jesus taught, is an alternate way, the road less traveled. It is a life radically centered in God, not in our stock portfolio of our family status. It is marked by repentance, with a deep understanding of dying and rising in Christ, and to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength. It is not religion as a hobby, but as life itself.

In the days before the exile, the ancient Jews gathered once a year in the temple to crown Yahweh as God to symbolize God's rule over all the people. It was worship directed vertically, just as the smoke of incense ascended to the highest reaches of the vaulted ceiling. It was meant to symbolize the deepest intentions of the prayerful faithful. But perhaps, as Keith Herron points out in an article from Christian Century, God's presence is best found outside the sanctuary, where Jesus is king not in places of power, but in places where people try to serve him. Perhaps we will see him most vividly not among those who choose violence as a solution, but among those who practice peace-filled solutions. Jesus is king not where people seek advantage, but where people seek to be helpful to others; not where people seek security, but in a working and breathing community, what some of us call church.

The Crucified and Risen Christ remembers not only all of us, but also those whom we have forgotten and neglected and marginalized; he remembers us as we are" "right and wrong, good and bad. He remembers the thief who repented, and who joins even Jesus in Paradise. May our religious leadership lead us to be good shepherds to all of God's people, part of the great kingdom that God is building in this world and the next. Let our ministry be like that of Jesus, whose arms were

always outstretched in acceptance and love.

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