

It's All About Power! Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43 *Feast of Christ the King*
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It's all about power! Who has it! What it looks like! And how it is executed! On this Feast Day of Christ the King, *power* is the subject of today's sermon.

On October 31, 1922, Benito Mussolini and his Black Shirts marched into Rome. Mussolini was a fascist, meaning someone who claims to speak for a whole nation or group, is utterly unconcerned with the rights of others, and is willing to use violence and other means to achieve one's goals. Installing fear among the people and terrorizing political opponents, he eventually took hold of national political power. Capitalizing on public discontent and economic instability, Mussolini declared that only he could restore order and thus was given the authority of Prime Minister of Italy. He promised to make Italy great again and it was he who first said that he would "drain the swamp." To his credit, he carried out an extensive public works program and reduced unemployment, making him very popular with the people. But in his efforts to "drain the swamp," he fired over 35,000 civil servants and gradually dismantled all of Italy's democratic institutions. By 1925, he had made himself dictator, taking the title *Il Duce* which means *The Leader*.

It was into this context of increased secularism, nationalism, and unbridled political authoritarianism that Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 (which we celebrate today). The Feast of Christ the King was instituted in hope that it would give Christians the strength and courage to stand up to the many challenges they were facing and to remind them that Christ and Christ alone must reign in their hearts, minds, wills, and bodies. Today, as our country and our world face similar challenges, we the faithful, need to be reminded where our true allegiance belongs. For if Christ the King does not rule our hearts, inform our politics, and teach us the right use of power, history could repeat itself once again. In summary, we either embrace the mind of Christ or we repeat the past. The choice is always ours.

Since between 3000 and 4000 BCE, when the first human civilizations were born, world culture has been seeped in a particular meta-movement: a dominant way of thinking and acting where power is hoarded, money is loved, nationalism is honored, the poor are oppressed, minorities are marginalized, and the cycle of violence is perpetuated. In this world, many are vying to be the winners, bragging about their superiority, and seeking the top positions. "Look at me; see how important and wonderful I am; I have more toys than you," they say. We call this way of walking in the world "the old humanity."

While the "old humanity" appears to work for those at the top, it is life depleting for those who find themselves at the bottom. The United States now has more income and wealth inequality than at any time in the last hundred years. This year, three multibillionaires own more wealth than the bottom half of American society – more than 160 million Americans. Today, half of our people live paycheck to paycheck, while millions of others struggle on starvation wages. Despite a lifetime of work, half of older Americans have no savings and no idea how they will ever be able to retire with dignity.

This "old humanity" is still the dominant way our political system operates-on both sides of the aisle! Instead of being courageous and willing to speak honestly about their position regarding difficult questions, political candidates frequently avoid uncomfortable topics by diverting the conversation to an unrelated topic that has been carefully constructed, previously vetted, and thoroughly rehearsed. Most of these candidates are more interested in being re-elected than striving for the good of the commonwealth. You know exactly what I mean if you have ever listened to a political debate. It is rather depressing!

Even religious leaders can fall into the temptation of being part of the "old humanity" by trying to be a kind of superhero or a popular people-pleaser. On the personal level, many of us still respond to conflicts, quarrels, and rejection with harsh aggressive words that are often angry and hurtful. Forgiveness and humility in the face of these stressful situations are often absent.

Overcoming this "old humanity," this dominant way of thinking where "me, myself, and I" are at the center, is what today's readings from the Holy Scriptures try to expose and repudiate. In Jeremiah, the prophet severely criticizes the leaders of Judah for their self-serving ways: "Woe to the shepherds who

destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture...you have driven them away and have not attended to them.” [Jer. 23:1-2] Jeremiah then lays out a vision for a new humanity, a new way of walking in the world where justice and righteousness will be the operating characteristics of leadership.

We Christians believe that Jesus is that promised leader, that “righteous branch...who will deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” [Jer. 23:5] We believe that Jesus is our spiritual guide and King, one whose life and ministry reflect the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

In today’s reading from the gospel of Luke, Jesus is mocked as “King of the Jews” as he hangs on the cross between two criminals. Instead of calling down curses on his enemies, instead of using his power to retaliate, he says: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” [Luke 23:34]

Jesus was a powerful leader who sacrificed his life for the good of the people. In his brief ministry, he preached good news to the poor, lifted up the lowly, healed the sick, embraced the untouchables, gave hope to the downtrodden, and welcomed the lost, the lonely, and the left behind. This was a humble man, who knelt down with a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. Instead of wearing a crown of jewels, his life ended with a crown of thorns. This is the template for the new humanity.

Jesus was a spiritual teacher who turned the conventional wisdom of his day up-side-down by blessing the poor, the meek, the sick, and the persecuted rather than blaming them for their condition. Instead of promoting war and violence, he focused on forgiveness and turning the other cheek. In a society where children were viewed as second class citizens, he embraced them and held them up as shining examples of what it means to be great in the kingdom of heaven. He broke the gender barrier by speaking to women, including them as both friends and disciples. Jesus had such empathy for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the immigrant, the sick, and the prisoner that he demanded his followers to show compassion towards these unfortunate ones. His mandate, to show radical love to one another, is what it means to have allegiance to Christ the King!

Our nation is now in crisis, both politically and spiritually. The anger, the division, and the lack of civil discourse in our country has increased exponentially in recent times. Instead of working together for the common good and showing compassion for all of God’s creatures, many are focused on grabbing power, winning at all costs, and discriminating against those who are on the margins. The moral compass of our country is at an all-time low and a spirit of nastiness is infecting its citizens.

There are significant moments in human history when a renewed and powerful cry for justice and righteousness is called for. That time is now! Now is the time to act from a place of Spirit and self-sacrifice. Now is the time to speak truth to power. “Jesus began a movement fueled by his Spirit, a movement whose purpose was and is to change the face of the earth from the nightmare it often is, into the dream that God intends.” [Michael Curry] It is a movement for a new humanity, a resurrection movement: a resurrection of love, a resurrection of justice, a resurrection of mercy, a resurrection of forgiveness, a resurrection of grace.

Since we promised to follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior; as the way, the truth, and the life, then he must become the template for our lives. “Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords; Mercifully grant that the people of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule...” Amen. [BCP 236]