

“Today We Can See The King”

- I. Introduction: Today is the Feast Day of Christ the King. It is always celebrated on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, immediately preceding the First Sunday of Advent. One senses that a transition has begun. The green altar hangings have been safely stored away, and in their place hang white ones to symbolize the purity of Christ. This Feast Day emphasizes “The peace of Christ in The Kingdom of Christ.” But as we have just heard in today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus does not always bring words of peace. He demands action from those who choose to follow him. So I ask these questions: Who is this King that we follow, and how can we see him? We might be surprised by the answers to these questions.

- II. We have a fascination with royalty -- kings and queens and dukes and duchesses. Many onlookers are excited by the grandeur and pomp of the royals. When we travel to England I have often checked the London newspaper to ascertain where the British royals were scheduled to appear over the next several days. I have noticed that crowds would gather just to get a glimpse of Prince Charles, Prince William, Prince Harry, or even a less well-known royal. Just this past week I watched a documentary on the life of the Royal Family in Buckingham Palace. The program depicted what was required to stage a state dinner in the Palace’s Grand Ballroom. The room seats 169 guests, and the preparations as well as the meal itself were lavish indeed. At the same time that we Americans are intrigued by such trappings, we have historically been suspicious of the monarchy as well. Remember we sent King George packing over 200 years ago and haven’t felt the need for another King or Queen since. So are we really drawn to a royal, kingly Jesus? Many say no – and in fact have kept their distance from the church and from Jesus because they’ve seen self-serving relationships between the wealthy elites around the world and the organized church. In my opinion, this is not an ungrounded criticism of organized religion. In some instances, the church has thrown its support behind the power of a wealthy few. This is sometimes true even now.

- III. But what I want to say unequivocally is that this is not the kind of church that Christ established, and this is not the kind of earthly powerful king that Jesus Christ came to be! In today’s Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus was making his last public statements before his arrest and passion. And he chose to do an amazing thing. He aligned himself with the most poor, the most hungry, those who had no clothing, those who were sick, and those who were in prison. In other words, he identified himself squarely with the marginalized and those in some kind of trouble. Not only did he

align himself with them but he made himself synonymous with them. What you do for one of them, you do for me. What you don't do for them, you don't do for me. And as if that was not enough, he went on to say that if you did not help those persons, you would be held accountable. He allowed that many would be surprised by this outcome, but this is in fact how it would be. Now what also interests me is that Jesus did not set any preconditions on receiving help; in other words, he did not establish a means test for determining who "deserved" help. In the same way that he unconditionally loves us, we are instructed to do our best to unconditionally love and care for others. In encountering and loving others in need we will meet Jesus!

IV. Let me share a story that captures this truth. The story is told by Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. She writes about one of the members of her church, a man named Ken who was dying of AIDS. Week after week Ken kept coming to her church, St. Andrews Presbyterian, in Marin County, CA. The people in the church could see that he was slowly dying. Anne writes that there was a large woman in the choir named Ranola who was a devout as you could be. She kept looking at Ken out of the corner of her eyes and was more than a little stand-offish. They stood at a distance. Anne Lamott writes that she thought that Ranola was afraid she might catch what Ken had. And so it was hard for Ranola to really see Ken as he was. But Ken kept coming and won the hearts of most of the members of the church. During prayer time he would share that, even in his decline, he felt the grace and redemption of God. On one particular morning the congregation began singing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The whole church stood, except for Ken who was too weak to stand. The words of the hymn begin "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola, from the choir, kept watching Ken and then suddenly her face began to contort and tears came to her eyes. She left the choir, moved toward Ken, bent down and picked him up, lifting him like a rag doll. Anne says Ranola held him next to her, as if he were her child, as they all sang together: "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he cares for me." I think that Ranola met Jesus that day.

IV. My brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus is also here at Church of the Ascension this morning. He has been here all week. He visited us briefly in the person of a man sleeping in one of our stairwells to stay warm. Jesus was and is here in the people who need our help -- in the people who no longer have a place to live, in the people whose utilities are about to be shut off because their bills can't be paid, in the people who are suffering from an illness that makes it hard for them to breathe when they walk or who are unable to leave their hospital beds because of their connections to a chemotherapy IV.

Jesus Christ is all around us. Jesus is sitting in an assisted living facility waiting for a visitor or a Stephen Minister to come. Jesus is homebound waiting for his Eucharistic visitor to bring communion. Jesus may have come here to church for the first this

morning and may be sitting close to you in the pew with challenges and worries that he or she alone knows about. Jesus is here – let those who have ears listen; let those who have eyes see – Jesus is here among us.

- V. Conclusion. Today's gospel reading has brought to mind an experience I had while Peg and I were living in New York City. I was teaching at Fordham University and taking an elective seminary course in the Fordham School of Religious Studies on the writings of John. The course was taught by a gifted priest from Manhattan who in one particular lecture described the use of light in the Gospel of John as a metaphor for Christ. I was very moved by the images in his lecture, but after class rushed to meet Peg and several friends. As always, getting around the city quickly during rush hour was a hassle. As I hurried, I passed a beggar sitting on the cold sidewalk; both of his legs had been amputated. As I went on down the block, a still small voice within me said, "turn around and go back." When I got back to the man, his face became bright with light. His weary face shown in the night as his eyes met mine. I knew I was called back to learn of his need and to assist him. Jesus said: What you do for one of them, you do for me. What you don't do for them, you don't do for me. I had almost missed seeing Jesus. How sad that would have been.

You see our constant hurrying, our worries, and our distractions can blind us to Christ's presence right next to us – in our pew, down the street from our home, at our office, in our university classes -- in the many, many needs of those suffering as the temperatures drop, the price of food continues to rise, jobs and homes are lost, and bankruptcies declared. As we continue to worship together this morning, I urge us to reflect upon the needs of others around us, remembering that Jesus was very, very clear. Jesus is a king who rejected earthly power. He told us that we will see him when we allow ourselves to draw close to the marginalized and those in some kind of trouble and to care for them. May God open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our spirits, so that we may do what Jesus has commanded us to do. *Amen.*