

# King of the moment

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, November 21, 2010, The Last Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Luke 23:33-43.*

In Sarah Palin's new book, *America By Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith and Flag*, being released on Tuesday, Ms. Palin makes the claim that we in America are "reawakening to the gift of our religious heritage." Though I am not on the waiting list for her book, her words do have odd resonance today as the church celebrates—some of us cautiously—the Feast of Christ the King. Unlike some Episcopal parishes, we at St. Bart's do not make a huge deal of the Feast, but it has been observed in our common life as Anglicans since shortly after Pope Pius XI introduced the feast to Roman Catholics in a lengthy encyclical in 1925.

The year 1925 was a time of thrilling opulence for a few, though not so for most, as the divide between the rich and poor was dramatically widening. The stock market had begun to soar the year before even as farms began to fail. The ever-loudening drone of nationalism had effectively silenced the hopes and dreams of peace that had been born in the memory of the atrocities of the Great War. Pope Pious XI believed that a new feast day in the Christian world might reawaken the fact that Christ is King of the Universe. If at the same time this new feast also strongly endorsed the patriarchy lying at the heart of the Catholic Church, all the better.

It is in Pope Pius' claim that Christ is King of all people everywhere (whether they know it or not) that finds common voice with Sarah Palin. The subtext of her message in this book and elsewhere is that religious truth belongs to us alone, that Christianity is the gold standard, the one faith with a corner on the truth. In that world Christ is King—no question about it. The fact that there is no evidence in what we know about the life of Jesus to support such triumphalism or religious jingoism sadly does not seem to be a problem. There is plenty of evidence that the disciples wanted Jesus to be king of the universe and even more evidence that the Christ of the church became the recipient of such attributes. Indeed the image of Jesus as *Christus Rex*, Jesus on the cross, adorned in royal, kingly robes, triumphant in his victory over the powers of the world, lingers in our tradition. And, yet, nothing that we know about Jesus bears witness to such a picture of him. Today's gospel depicts a broken, dying Jesus, loving and inclusive to the end but clearly the antithesis of worldly power. His life, in fact, makes a mockery of kingship.

So why do we, and should we, still pay homage to this complicated image of Christ the King? It is so militaristic and exclusively gender specific that it makes many of us squirm. Can it still work at all? I don't know. For me at the very least, it has to be revised, described with different words, imagined in different images, brought somehow closer to the reality of our lives.

Today's passage actually offers some clarity for me. It shows Jesus at his most vulnerable moment as very powerful but in an unlikely way—powerful in his presence. On the cross the image of Jesus is not that of an isolated, Lone Ranger savior, gritting his way to death as a means of saving us, but as a generous presence able to engage the thieves dying alongside him. To the end he lived, tenderly, inclusively, without judgment.

I can't imagine a more powerful scene. Would I call it kingly? Probably not, but transcendently powerful for sure. Somehow that sense of Christ's power is for me more utterly authentic than carrying him on a cross into battle ever could be. I admit that I am skeptical that any of these words from the cross were ever spoken as recorded; but somehow their presence in the life of the church, in the life of Jesus as remembered, matters to me. Even in the "scripted-for-maximum-benefit" gospels, Jesus didn't go Rambo, didn't miraculously save himself or those whom he loved; he promised to be *with* them. In that moment he gave us the lesson of real power.

When, for example, someone who really loves me—me for who I am—hears me when I am tiresome or whiny and loves me anyway, his/her presence is supremely

Christ-like and feels powerful in a way that could be called kingly or queenly. When I witness people tirelessly continuing to work in Haiti long after the earthquake, now fighting the onslaught of cholera, when I see a child, who is gripped in the grime and despair of destruction and inadequate everything, seem comforted by the presence of those around him/her, in that moment I believe that Christ is reigning, powerfully reigning in a setting and a moment that is unimaginable to me, reigning without an army but with an idea, an idea of love, love that is generous beyond our power to comprehend. When cynical, fearful people like me, and most of us at one time or another, are moved to care about the plight of those whom we don't even know, discovering within ourselves untapped and unexpected generosity, Christ is ruling. When we take the higher road in office politics or church politics or family politics, believing the best about someone against all evidence to the contrary, Christ is king of the moment.

But are such moments enough? Certainly they are at the moment; but part of our call to follow Jesus is to think large and systemically. In my heart I know that Christ cannot be king of this or any world as long as so few have so much and so many have so little. Nicholas Kristof has written two op-ed articles this month, the second an even more disturbing defense of the first, concerning the growing divide between the very rich and the very poor. It is not un-American to suggest that there is something wrong when the top 1% of our country owns 35% of our private net worth. For us as those who say that we base our lives on the way Jesus lived, we have to speak up and maybe even live differently.

For most of my years in Jackson, the little girls of some close friends attended the only Montessori elementary school in Jackson at the time. Most of us thought the girls' parents were nuts. The school was located at Christ the King Parish on the far Westside—definitely not the right side of town. The area was generally considered an unsafe area; and though I often wonder if such designations are not really about white people's racism and fears rather than about bona fide police statistics, in this case it was true. A couple of blocks in every direction from the church was the site of a murder almost every weekend, and the physical surroundings of everything but the church/school compound bore evidence of crack use and general deprivation all around, with pockets of really abject poverty to be found.

In the midst of all this despair, though, stood the parish, Christ the King. In the center of the grounds, there was a very unattractive but absolutely not-to-be-missed statue of Christ the King—resplendent in all manner of resplendence that could be imagined by some not terribly gifted artist about what Christ as a king should look like. And though everything about it offended my highfalutin, snobbish, and probably affected ideas about good art, it was a beacon by God—a beacon that said “on this block and in this place, Christ is King.” The sisters who ran this place meant to see that it was true, and they delivered it. These competent, loving women of God were not to be messed with: Christ was King (or Queen) on their block.

I am not actually sure why that memory remains so powerful for me. It is a simple non-didactic story, but it is an image that comes to mind every year on this day. Somehow more than all the resplendence of the day, the soaring music, the gorgeous vestments, the breathtaking architecture, it is that tacky statue in the middle of the worst section of Jackson, MS, that connects me to the Jesus whose life I want to follow. There he is accessible, a humble servant, one who loved beyond all boundaries, one who can teach me to do the same. Christ the King? Sure, maybe, who can say? But surely it is Christ who brings love into the world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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