

This past week we have been hearing a great deal about world leaders. President Obama has been meeting with world leaders in Europe. President-Elect Trump has been conversing with world leaders as he prepares to take over the presidency in this country. Leadership is something many of us have been thinking about as we look to the future. So, I find it very interesting that today, as we come to the end of the church year and the scripture readings for this Christ the King Sunday, we find ourselves having to struggle with what leadership is all about. On this day we are essentially confronted with the question, “What does it mean for us to name Christ as our leader? What can it mean for us to name Christ as our King?”

It is rather difficult for us as Americans to understand living under royal rule. After all, our identity as a nation was borne out of the experience of breaking away from royal rule and kingship. When we think of a king, we tend to think of a ruler with magnificent power. When we think of kings and powerful leaders, we think of those who oversee the work and bureaucracy of a nation. We think of one who is in charge, one who grants citizens a measure of security, one who affirms the values of the people. We look to leaders who promise a better tomorrow and a prosperous

future. We tend to think of kings and rulers as people who hold positions of honor, people who are looked **up** to. When we picture a king, we think of looking **up** to one who has power, to one who has been exalted.

Theologian, Robert Capon, in *Hunting the Divine Fox* presents a wonderful picture of our typical American understanding of ruler or leader – and I have to say it doesn't look much like Jesus. He writes:

. . . almost nobody resists the temptation to jazz up the humanity of Christ. The true paradigm of the ordinary American view of Jesus is Superman: "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It's Superman! Strange visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American Way." If that isn't popular christology, I'll eat my hat. Jesus -- gentle, meek and mild, but with secret, souped-up, more-than-human insides -- bumbles around for thirty-three years, nearly gets himself done in for good by the Kryptonite Kross, but at the last minute, struggles into the phone booth of the Empty Tomb, changes into his Easter suit and, with a single bound, leaps back up to the planet Heaven. It's got it all -- including, just so you shouldn't miss the lesson, kiddies: *He never once touches Lois Lane.*

You think that's funny? Don't laugh. The human race is, was and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. We don't want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it. We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: He claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It's not that we weren't looking for the Messiah; it's just that he wasn't what we were looking for. Our kind of Messiah [our kind of king] would come down from a cross. He would carry a folding phone booth in his back pocket. He wouldn't do

a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying."

Well, today we **are** given a picture of Christ the King, this one we call "Lord." And, in the picture, this King is **not** revealed to us by looking **up**, but by looking **down**. The royal face God reveals to us through the person of Jesus does **not** aspire to the heights of glory, power, wealth or fame. No, to see the kingship revealed in Jesus, the Christ, we must look **down** to the lowly life he chose to walk.

So, what can it mean for us to name Christ as our King? On this day, the writer of Luke's gospel gives us an answer as he completely shatters our perceptions of what a king or ruler should look like. Our gospel reading is one in which Jesus, our King, is being derided, mocked and taunted. Luke gives us the picture of one who has been falsely charged with fomenting rebellion against Rome. He gives us a picture of Jesus on the cross, insulted, mocked and killed. Today, we see Jesus, our King, as one who hangs there dying. And what is revealed in this passage is miserable, deeply moving and shocking. Quite frankly, we would prefer to hide our face rather than watch someone who is truly honorable tortured, because even our compassion is not able to help this one who hangs there, this one we call "Lord." And, to say to this helpless man as one of the

criminals hanging beside him says, “Help yourself!” is to mock him. To call him “King of the Jews” as do those who crucify him is to ridicule him.

The last moments of Jesus’ life all seem to be in stark contrast to what is valued as great in our world, to what we think kingship and leadership look like. Jesus did not and does not come in power. In fact, he refuses to come in power but instead appears in wretched vulnerability. And, in doing so, he breaks a law, the law of death. He breaks this law by ushering in God’s law of love. You see, Jesus does not come vowing retribution even on those who crucify him. Instead, he comes offering forgiveness and suffering love. This Jesus does not come down off the cross to prove that he is a king with power. Instead, he remains on that instrument of torture, humiliated and representing all who suffer unjustly. And, this Jesus does **not** promise us a better tomorrow but offers to redeem us today, right **now** in this present moment.

When talking about the redemption offered us today, theologian, David Lose, writes:

Jesus doesn’t tell the repentant criminal that someday *in the future* he will enter into God’s presence but instead says, “*Today*, you shall be with me in paradise.” Today, now, in this very moment. Christians have sometimes been accused of pining for a distant and better future and therefore sitting out the struggles and challenges of the day. But in these verses Jesus is focused on this very moment, promising that those who believe in him, those who see in his

vulnerability the revelation of God's mercy and grace, will be ushered into God's presence immediately.

This King we see hanging on a cross rules by pouring out redemption, forgiveness and suffering love upon the entire world. As Jesus hangs on a cross, we see a King who does not lord his greatness over all, but instead forgives enemies and offers redemption to criminals. And, as we hear the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death, we discover that this leader, this King, is one who is numbered **with** the criminals. This leader is counted as one of the transgressors. This innocent one does not hang out with those in power but with the sinners, the criminals, the weak and the vulnerable, living and dying in solidarity with all those the powerful despise. And, as this King is **ruling** from a cross, he calls us to follow his example by serving, forgiving and loving all those in our lives, loving all those we consider "other."

So, what does it mean for us to name Christ as our King? Well, for any who call Jesus "Lord," it means we are called to join God's "insistent, consistent, and persistent solidarity with the weak, the oppressed, and the forgotten of this world. In short, the church of Jesus Christ reveals itself as faithful to its Lord **only** in so far as it stands with those who are most vulnerable." (*David Lose*) Whatever our understandable desire for strength and security, the leader to whom we look is the one who leaves behind all

the strength and power and status, emptying himself and taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:7) in order to redeem those who are weak, vulnerable and lost. And, guess what, **that includes us!** This one whom we call “Lord” is the one who redeems **us** today, forgives **us** always, showers and bathes **us** in suffering love, and sets **us** free to stand with those in need around us as we see in them the very presence of the God who always takes the side of the vulnerable.