

Christ is King and Caesar is Not

By
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Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. ² Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

⁵ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be

saved, and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Last week in confirmation class, we were discussing the liturgical calendar and how it's a useful tool for learning more about the life and work of Jesus Christ. Today is the last day of that liturgical calendar – Christ the King Sunday – and next week, the first Sunday of Advent, is the start of a whole new year.

I asked confirmands last week how long they thought we had been celebrating Christ the King Sunday, and it won't surprise you to hear I got great answers. Someone suggested the 2nd century, thinking that one hundred years was enough time to digest the resurrection and that it would be high on the church's list to celebrate Christ reigning from on high. We wondered whether it was the Middle Ages because that was when they were really into that king stuff, so they would want to talk about Jesus as a king because that's what people understood. Another said it sounded like the late 1800s because it just had a modern ring to it: Christ the King Sunday.

These are all plausible answers – after all, is there ever a bad time to meditate on Christ's omnipotent power? Is there ever a context where that's not relevant?

Well, I won't keep you in suspense any longer. It was December 11, 1925, that Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical entitled “Quas Primas, Introducing the Feast of Christ the King.” He addresses a variety of concerns that until recently felt pretty out of fashion: the importance of Christ's rule in people's lives, creeping secularism, and the diminished credibility of church leaders. And his answer to that was a holiday in honor of Christ the King. It all felt very passé, such that we progressive Protestants even gave it another name to get away from all this creepy masculine stuff, referring to it as Reign of Christ Sunday. In recent years, some of our ilk even removed the ‘g’ in kingdom to emphasize the kindom of Christ.

I guess that's clever enough, but on the centennial of Pius's encyclical and in this autumn where protestors are reclaiming our nation's proud anti-monarchical heritage, I decree that Christ the King Sunday is having a moment! Unfortunately, that means we have to talk about fascism.

I want to be clear here what I mean by fascism. Fascism is not any political ideology I disagree with, and fascism is not anything on the conservative side of our political spectrum. It is infamously hard to define, but it matters that we try, because it was just three years before Pope Pius's encyclical that the fascist government of Benito Mussolini rose to power within view of the Vatican.

Mussolini himself had a serviceable definition: "Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State." He and many others add that there is a single autocratic leader, the personification of the collective will of that state. The term itself comes to us from the Latin *fascis*, meaning a bundle of sticks or rods, traditionally depicted surrounding an axe. The idea being it is a collection of uniform pieces of wood that surround and bolster the central piece. And uniformity is key here: the citizenry obeys absolutely; everything is done at scale; those deemed to be irregular – leftists, LGBTQ people, those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, immigrants, Jewish people – all these are not fit to be formed into *fascis* and are violently removed from the body politic.

The image of the *fascis* has been around since ancient Rome and hasn't always had fascist overtones. Coin collectors with a mercury penny will see *fascis* on the tails side. The statue of the great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, inside his memorial shows him seated in a chair, the armrests to which are *fascis*. The *fascia* that your gutters are nailed into comes from the same word.

But the role of the citizenry in a fascist state is to be those uniform rods operating at scale to bolster the state and protect the personification of their collective will, the leader, the one in whom the fullness of the state is pleased to dwell. The role of the *fascis* is to uniformly gather around and

protect the one who is before all things, the one in whom all things hold together, the one for whom all things were created. The head of the state, the beginning, the firstborn, the one who has first place in everything. In Pius's Rome, that leader was called the duce, across the Pyrenees in Spain, he was the caudillo, and over the Alps, the führer.

You can see that we Christians, with our incarnate God, have to be very careful here. Our Jewish neighbors have the law and the prophets, but in Jewish practice, the God of Israel can hardly be named, let alone imagined as incarnate. Our Muslim neighbors have the prophet Muhammad above all others, but he is merely the one who recorded the Qur'an, which was recited by Allah alone, the unmatched one. The Buddha reached enlightenment, but he wasn't the incarnation of it. In the world of big religion, we are the only ones with an incarnate God. We are the only ones who believe that there is a human being in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. An incarnate being, sitting at the right hand of the Father. An incarnation of the divine word, present at creation, through whom and for whom all things were created.

You'd think Christians would be really good at not falling victim to the idolatry of fascism, but the caudillo and the führer relied heavily on the church – Catholic and Protestant alike. Even the avowedly anti-clerical duce was able to win over many in the Roman church. Even today, on the centennial of Christ the king, we have white Christian nationalism and dominionism, worrying ideologies that usurp the power that belongs rightly to Christ alone.

Regrettably, I think Christians are tempted by these ideologies precisely because of our belief in an incarnate God. We are inured to the belief that the church on this earth is to be one, united, body of Christ and us

individually members of it. It is tempting to think that our role is to be uniform fasces operating at scale to support and bolster Christ's church.

And then we all too often take that commitment and allow it to be used in service to something other than Christ. For there is plenty in our lives that wants us for fasces! Our jobs are demanding more and more of us. Tech billionaire Marc Andreessen has proudly declared, "Software is eating the world," algorithms that reduce us to clicks and shares in exchange for little hits of dopamine. The market is ever in search of new avenues for profit and consumers. There are fewer and fewer off-ramps from our culture of high achievement. Those with chronic illnesses or disabilities are increasingly dehumanized in a medical-industrial complex operating at scale and driven by profit. And then there's youth sports. Worst of all, I have been made a fasces in my own home by the rapacious oligarch Polly Pocket, who believes that my whole purpose is to provide her with snacks. That's my dog, by the way...

As ever, then, the task before us on Christ the King Sunday is discernment. On the one hand, to serve Christ the King is to submit to the will of the one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. But on the other, those same muscles flexed in service to something else leads us down terrible paths. The crucial piece is to understand the difference between Christ's kingdom and those idolatries that theologian Karl Barth called "lordless powers."

My former colleague at Pittsburgh Seminary, Edwin van Driel, has written a new book, the first sentence of which is as follows: "The very first thing God decides is to be Jesus Christ." Again, "the very first thing God decides is to be Jesus Christ." By which he means that before there was creation, before there was the fall, before there was anything: God decided

to be Jesus Christ, to be incarnate, to be among us, to be in relationship with creation.

Our text today agrees. Christ is the firstborn of all creation, that for him all things were created, that all things were created through him, that he is before all things, that in him all things hold together. In other words, “the very first thing God decides is to be Jesus Christ.”

What this means is that the majesty of creation – the incredible diversity of life – the arts, poetry, science, medicine, music – the awe-inspiring complexity of humanity and culture and language – all of it, created to be in relationship, just as it is, with God, incarnate in the midst of all of this.

I’ve looked at a lot of fasces this week in preparation for this sermon and they all look the same. They’re boring. The trees that make up the fasces have all been cut down, fed through a mill, severed to a uniform length, and then run through a lathe until smooth and perfectly circular.

That is how we know if we are in the court of the living God or just some fasces surrounding a lordless power. Do you feel reduced to nothing? Have you been through the mill? Have all your rough edges been knocked off and sanded down? Do you feel like you have to hide your light under a bushel?

You were created just as you are – rough edges, imperfections, burls, knots, scars, qualities that just don’t work at scale, all those things that make you anything but boring. You were created to be in relationship with the firstborn of all creation, with Christ the King. The powers that Pope Pius XI railed against, and that continue to reign today, need you to work at scale, to have been cut down, run through the mill, made uniform on the

lathe. They need you to fit into the fasces or you will be violently bounced from the body politic. But luckily, these powers are fleeting.

In a moment, we will sing hymn 81, Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken. Haydn wrote this tune because, after traveling to England and hearing “God Save The King,” he wanted to give his countrymen a national anthem and a way to sing gratitude to their king and to inspire them in battle against the French. Not especially noble origins, I admit, but it got worse as the tune was run through the mill and shaped on the lathe to be the national anthem of Nazi Germany. This morning, we reclaim this tune with beautiful words that describe the holy habitation of the most high, the blest abode of one whose word cannot be broken, where we are assured of our salvation, where the cloud leads us by day and the fire by night, where there is always enough for all, where all fears of want are removed in the company of the God who never fails.

To worship Christ the King is to dwell in that holy habitation, to worship the one who decided before anything else to be in relationship with us just as we are. If you’re feeling like you’ve been through the mill, like you’ve been reduced to nothing, like you just can’t scale anymore, come into the courts of Christ the King, where there is strength and forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation. Christ is on the throne. We don’t have to settle for anything less than that.

Amen.