



## ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### THE KING OF LOVE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell

November 21, 2004

Anyone who thinks Southern California doesn't have seasons isn't paying attention. Our seasonal shifts may not be as dramatic as—say North Carolina or New York, but since I'm actually FROM here the autumn signs and symbols we see all around us this morning feel like fall to me! The trees with their brilliant orange and yellow leaves along with bright blue skies, cooler temperatures, shorter days and (perhaps the most locally telling of all the year-end-ports) – the banners advertising Rose Parade bleacher seating springing up all over town: signs of the season, Pasadena-style.

Another sign of the season—Episcopal-style—are the lessons appointed for this last Sunday after Pentecost: which is the last Sunday of our church year. I loved Ed's image last week of "pushing restart and booting up another church year" for that is precisely what we are about to do next Sunday as we enter the season of Advent: the season of preparation for the coming of the Christ child. But today, as we end one church year and look forward to a new year ahead, our focus is not yet on the birth of Jesus the baby; rather our lessons and hymns call us to consider the Reign of Christ the King.

Now there are any number of reasons the language of kingship can be problematic for us as 21st century Christians: the gender thing and the patriarchy problem for starters—not to mention the allergy we Americans have historically had to monarchies in general (with the notable exception of our seemingly insatiable appetite for the latest goings on in the British Royal Family.) But no matter how we try to work around it, claiming Christ the King—Christ AS King—is not only part of our historic tradition, I believe it is a critical aspect of our prophetic future.

I want to challenge us this morning to consider that the question we should be asking on this Christ the King Sunday 2004 is not "How can we get around this kingship stuff" but "Who is this king of Glory?" The answer is, I believe, contained in both our texts this morning—in the words of the prophet Jeremiah and in the account of the Gospel according to Luke—and while I will turn to both of those texts in just a moment, first I want to get on my soap box and say that I believe that it has never been more important for us to know our history, to claim our tradition and to stand firmly, proudly and resolutely on the foundation of the prophetic faith we have inherited.

I believe that it is IN our history—IN our tradition—that we have the language we need to offer this war-torn, polarized and demoralized world the Good News of God's abundant love. And as we sit here this morning, I guarantee you that we are surrounded by a city full of those yearning for a spiritual home, not knowing that All Saints would welcome

them with open arms; those starving for spiritual sustenance yet bypassing this banquet we offer every Sunday morning, not knowing that the table is set for them; those rejecting the Christian Gospel because what they hear described in the media as Christian Moral Values sound neither moral nor valuable. My brothers and sisters, we not only HAVE moral values, we have a cloud of witnesses and a communion of saints surrounding us as we proclaim them. And so on this “New Year’s Eve” of the church year, I want to ask you to join me in making a “new year’s resolution”—to apply ourselves to the project of proclamation of those values—of that faith, of that hope—not in reaction to some exit poll but in response to our baptismal promises to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ Jesus.”

So who IS this king of Glory? What kind of king is he—where do we look for his job description? A place to start is to fast-forward just a little bit and recall these words to a favorite Advent hymn:

He brings God’s rule, O Zion, he comes from heaven above.  
His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth and love.  
All lands will bow before him, their voices will adore him,  
O blest is Christ that came in God’s most holy name.

The rule of God—the kingship of Christ—is not about earthly power or political authority, revenge or judgment; it’s about wholeness, it’s about restoring creation to the fullness of peace and justice, truth and love that God intended. It’s about all lands—ALL people—not just a chosen few. It’s about the primary moral value of prizing the interconnectedness of all humanity—of loving our neighbors as ourselves. The kingship of Jesus is AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN vastly different from a worldly kingship. When we celebrate Christ the King, we’re holding up a king who is, first and foremost, a reconciler, a redeemer, a servant. This is a king who comes to show us how to live as a people of God in the kingdom of God—a shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

It is critical to observe that we celebrate Christ’s kingship today with a Gospel passage on the crucifixion: we end the church year not with a story of triumph and vindication but of humiliation, pain and vulnerability.

This week—mulling these texts in preparation for this morning—I was struck over and over again by the words Jesus spoke from the cross: “My God, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” For I think the truth is, most of the time, neither do we. Know what we are doing. I think that every time we try to make the kingship of Christ into a rule of law rather than a reign of love we crucify him again. Every time we choose the institution of the church over the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we grieve the heart of God. Every time we hold our tongues and allow the strident voices of the all-too-certain ideologues of the Religious Right to claim moral values as their sole and private preserve, we fail in our call to shepherd God’s people, to calm their fears, to gather them in.

Hear again what Jeremiah said: “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock—and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall not fear any longer or be dismayed nor shall any be missing.” ANY be missing—that’s God’s goal according to a 6<sup>th</sup> century prophet: not some political agenda according to a 21<sup>st</sup> century rector. The Kingship of Christ is intended to

gather all humanity -- all creation -- into God's loving embrace. Not just those who look like us, act like us, dress, worship or VOTE like us. That's the job description of the Good Shepherd, the King of Love, the One who loved us enough to become one of us and died trying to show us how to love each other as He loved us. Jesus didn't come to make us religious or orthodox—he came to give us abundant life: and to empower us to gather others into that life—that abundance—that love.

The kingship he offered, the love he proclaimed, was too radical, too inclusive, too dangerous to the status quo to survive without a struggle, then or now. The King of Love IS strong and mighty in battle, all right, but the battle in which he is engaged is a battle over fear, and the weapons he employs are weapons of mass reconciliation: truth and justice; peace and love. It is an amazing irony that the very Jesus who gave his life to show us how to love each other has had that message of reconciliation hijacked and transformed instead into a means of polarization.

He has been co-opted by those who understand the Reign of Christ to be not about the Lordship of Love but about obedience to orthodoxy. The king whose throne was a cross and whose dying words were “My God, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” has been replaced with a judge whose message is “My God will not forgive you unless you are doing it my way.” It is time for us to find our voices and reclaim the historic faith we have inherited: to PRO-claim the Good News of the Gospel of Grace whenever and wherever we can; to challenge those who preach the Jesus of Judgment by our serving instead the King of Love.

It's an ancient battle—this struggle between love and fear— one that we don't have to look too far this morning to see raging all around us. The challenge is that there seems to be nowhere to hide from it; the opportunity is that we have an amazing community of support surrounding us in this parish, this diocese and this Episcopal Church. In the days, weeks and months ahead, we will have many opportunities here at All Saints Church to engage with each other as we live out this “new year's resolution” – as we apply ourselves to the project of proclamation.

We start next Sunday with Glen Stassen and Peter Dreier and concrete conversations about proclaiming progressive moral values. We'll have opportunities during the seasons of Epiphany and Lent to gather for study, reflection and inspiration focused on how we can be a people of peace during these times of cultural war. We clearly have our work cut out for us—but we also have a history that tells us miracles happen when All Saints Church gets to work. And my deepest prayer for all of us is that we can continue to live into our history of being a place that doesn't just talk about the love of God but acts on it.

“It's easy to talk about the love of God,” writes Joan Chittister. “It's another thing to practice it. That's how relationships sanctify me. They show me where holiness is for me. They show me where growth is for me. Alone, I am what I am but in community I have the chance to become everything that I can be. And so, stability bonds me to this group of people and to these relationships—so that resting in the security of each other we can afford to stumble and search, knowing that we will be caught if we fall and we will be led where we cannot see by those who have been there before us.”

Now there's a promise: "we will be caught if we fall"—enabling, empowering and challenging each other to prepare the way for the reign of God that is the way of nothing less than justice, truth and ... most of all ... love.

Prepare the way, O Zion. Your Christ is drawing near!  
Let every hill and valley, a level way appear.  
Greet one who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story.  
Oh, blest is Christ that came, in God's most holy name.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.