

Proper 29, Year B

- May have noticed we do not appear to be celebrating the holiday often called Christ the King Sunday – vestments are still green for one more Sunday, rather than festal white
- Hope that doesn't offend or upset anyone – actually in favor of the holiday itself, or at least what it represents – proclaiming the royalty, the sovereignty, the rule of Christ – there's just one problem: it doesn't actually exist as a holiday in our Church's calendar – part of our Revised Common Lectionary, but the holiday itself is a relatively modern RC invention
- Established by *Quas Primas*, papal encyclical by Pope Pius XI, in 1925 – response to growing nationalism in the wake of WWI and the increased power that was being given to secular authorities – essentially, it was created as a claim that we have to look somewhere other than our nation to solve our problems
- That document, *Quas Primas*, says a number of things about the holiday meant to crown Christ as King
- It says that we as humans are meant to crown Christ the king of our hearts and our wills, so that we will love him fully and follow him truly
- Says that we celebrate Christ the King Sunday so that “legem credendi lex statuit supplicandi” – so that the law of praying establishes the law of believing – that maxim heard so often in the Anglican Church as ‘lex orandi, lex credendi’ – essentially saying, if we pray to Christ specifically as King this day, then we might come to actually recognize him as King of our lives
- That encyclical even says that to Christ belongs legislative, judicial, and executive power – there can be no doubt that the holiday was (and is!) a controversial statement, especially put in such terms
- In some ways, though, *Quas Primas* was even more controversial than we can imagine – it was issued, after all, in Dec of 1925 – the same year that a man named Benito Mussolini was in the process of taking over Italian government and establishing himself as leader of an authoritarian police state under a new regime called “fascism” – a name meant to associate Mussolini and his new party with the great history of the Roman Republic
- So it was no coincidence, and no small thing, when Pope Pius XI said, in that time and in that place, that “the empire of our redeemer [Jesus Christ] embraces all [humanity].”
- And it was in such a context that *Quas Primas* condemned what it called “the seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities and rivalries between nations, which still

hinder so much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and measure everything by these”

- It was a revolutionary feast day – one that rebuked the powers at work in the world, meant to instead affirm a ruler whose kingdom was not of this world – an oath of loyalty against the powers that be, in favor of the power that was, and is, and is to come
- It was, of course, still thoroughly Roman Catholic, too: in the calendar, it was originally placed on the last Sunday in October – somewhat “coincidentally” the day often celebrated in Protestant Churches as Reformation Sunday
- Perhaps a 400-year old dig at the fact that Protestant Reformers were so often crafting theology in support of political ideology
- But even so, it’s a shame, if you ask me, that it was later moved in 1970 to the last Sunday of the Church year – when falling just prior to Advent, which along with Advent’s focus on the second coming, would seem to imply that the Kingship of Christ is only a far off hope, something that may yet come to be when Christ comes again
- If we in the Episcopal Church ever do adopt the holiday into our calendar, I hope we’ll shy away from such associations – and crown Christ king of our hearts and wills here and now, in the midst of our lives and political realities – rather than seeming to say that should he show up again on our doorstep, why we’d be perfectly happy to crown him then, but not before
- But I’ve gone this long without even talking about our readings for today, which is questionable territory for a preacher – luckily, this week, we have the perfect reading to go with learning about Christ the King: a reading from the Book of Revelation
- We’ll actually hear some more about Revelation during Easter this coming year, which is tremendously exciting – but I want to take this chance to talk a bit about the background of the book sometimes called the Revelation to John even though it wasn’t in fact written by John the Apostle – a fact which has been known since at least the year 250
- It was the last book to be incorporated into the canon – hence its place at the end of the NT – but not because, as some people think, it was the last composed – it was simply the last to be agreed upon – it was likely the support of St. Athanasius that eventually turned the tables in favor of its inclusion, sometime in the 4th C
- It’s name, Revelation, means a revealing, a disclosure – same thing as the word apocalypse

– which is, in fact, the book's name in Greek

- Revelation is, without a doubt, the most frequently misinterpreted book in the entire canon of Scripture, and often damagingly so! – it is easy to misread, if we're honest, and a number of people have done so throughout the centuries
- The Protestant Reformers were a little skeptical of it, a little hesitant – Luther made it secondary to other books of Scripture, Zwingli denied its canonicity, and it's the only book of Scripture that John Calvin did not write a commentary upon
- A lot of people have been unsure of what to make of Revelation, how it speaks to us today
- And then there are the people who are a little *too* into it
- It's from these folks that we get all the different attempts to identify who the antichrist is, what constitutes the mark of the beast, how we'll be able to identify the four horsemen...
- Groups like the Branch Davidians are an unfortunate example of what happens when you get too consumed with trying to interpret the signs of the Book of Revelation as if it were merely a foretelling of the future
- But Revelation is from that genre I alluded to last week, called Apocalyptic – no coincidence that this is from the Greek name of the book itself, as it's probably the premier example of apocalyptic literature
- Far from meaning to literally describe the exact events of some future coming of Christ, the book, and other examples of apocalyptic lit in Scripture, are instead written to be a comfort **in the present** to the people hearing them
- They're written to those who are hopeless, facing exile or persecution or captivity – and written at a moment where hope has all but disappeared, where it seems that the only thing that can resolve things in the hearers' favor is direct divine intervention – a real-life deus ex machina, God coming down to set all things right
- Apocalyptic literature often conveys otherworldly visions with extremely vivid imagery and a sense of mystery, of looking at the unfathomable inner workings of God's purposes
- And this is exactly what Revelation is – written at a time of what many historians will say in hindsight may not have been terribly serious persecution, it was nonetheless meant to hearten early Christians who were becoming increasingly unwelcome in the Roman Empire
- The author is given a number of visions, most involving sets of seven things, seven being a number representing completeness, showing that the story was ending, that God's perfection was being reached – seven letters to seven angels of seven churches, the

opening of seven seals, the sounding of seven trumpets, seven bowls of plagues are poured over the earth

- It's a harrowing set of visions, and over the years, commentators have never been able to agree about what exactly these visions are intended to represent
- The details and context were intended to speak directly to 1st C Christians, though perhaps even then not clearly – they speak much less directly, not at all clearly, to us
- That we read Revelation at all is somewhat remarkable, but it's good that we do
- The Revelation – apocalyptic – is what biblical scholar Raymond Brown calls “an enduring witness to a reality that defies all our measurements; it testifies to another world that escapes all scientific gauges and finds expression in symbols and visions.”
- He goes on to say that “liturgy properly understood brings ordinary believers into contact with this heavenly reality. To a world that accepts only what it can see, hear, and feel, Rev is the final scriptural gateway to what the eye has not seen and the ear not heard.”
- Rev “does not give an exact knowledge of that other world... rather, it attests forcefully that at every moment of human history, even the most desperate moment that causes people to lose hope, God is present.”
- Like the holiday called Christ the King, Revelation is meant to force us to think about the relation of our faith to civil authorities – meant to help us think about the question of how we would stay faithful in the face of persecution, or if our loyalty to Christ were at odds with our loyalty to our rulers
- That is why we really ought to be reading Revelation, and why I hope that we do someday celebrate Christ the King – and properly, not too close to Advent
- Because Christ isn't meant to rule heaven or earth **only** in the future, only at the consummation of the world when he comes again
- Meant to rule over us, **now**
- That's why, of all the images of the Book of Revelation, one of the most enduring is of the worship taking place around the throne of God, upon which sits the Lamb that was slain
- That's the worship that is going on now and has been going on forever, the worship we join in every Sunday – the worship of Christ, our King, now and forever