

Christ the King (RCL/B): "Christ the King's Agenda"

Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

November 23-24, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Maybe you've noticed some new words to old hymns. One example is "Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven" (a hymn we sang at Pastor Mark's and my wedding):

Praise my soul, the King of heaven;
To his feet your tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore his praises sing.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise the everlasting King!

I loved the tales of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table when I was little, so the king imagery gives me warm fuzzies. This hymn is #865 in our ELW. #864 is a lot like it, except it removes the king imagery. The title of 864 is "Praise, My Soul, the **God** of Heaven." Instead of singing, "Praise the everlasting King" at the end of the first stanza, we sing, "Praises everlasting ring!" Close, but no cigar.

Another favorite is "Be Thou My Vision." It's a traditional Irish tune (Slane) and the original lyric refers to the High King of heaven:

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise
Thou mine inheritance, now and always
Thou and Thou only first in my heart
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art.

In the newer version, #793, we sing,

Thou and Thou only first in my heart
great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Original lyrics:

High King of heaven, my victory won
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun...

New lyrics:

Light of my soul, after victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O heaven's Sun!

Why the changes? At least partly to make the hymn more understandable to people who don't live in a monarchy! Or who may not know what a high king was in ancient Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales. In the U.S. we sing "God Bless Our Native Land," not "God Save the Queen" or "God Save the King." Also, this

language of royalty is very **male** imagery for our God who is **spirit**, neither male **nor** female. Jesus Christ was male, for sure, but the first and third Persons of the Trinity are neither male nor female, but **spirit**. I understand these concerns, but no one is going to convince me that something poetic is not lost in the translation.

Yet **this** weekend, and the last weekend of **every** church year, we celebrate “Christ the King”! We sing “Crown Him with Many Crowns”! In today’s Gospel we hear Pontius Pilate ask, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” (John 18:33), and we hear Jesus answer, “*My kingdom is not from this world,*” (John 18:36). There’s the heart of it: Jesus may be a king, but He’s not like any king that’s **ever** been before. He exercises power in love.

The celebration of Christ the King in Lutheran circles is fairly recent, like the last 45 years or so. The origins of the feast are pretty interesting. In 1925 Pope Pius XI created it in reaction to the rise of secularism, communism and fascism in the world. The point: Jesus Christ is the true ruler of all, and His realm of mercy and love stands in absolute contrast to the destructive wielding of power by many earthly heads of state. At the Last Supper, Jesus asks His Father in heaven to protect His followers in the world, so that they will be unstained by it. He speaks of them being **in** the world, but not **of** the world. They are to align their lives with the values of their Savior, not the passing whims of the world. When others cry for vengeance, they are to preach forgiveness. When others serve the dollar, they are to serve the destitute. When others minimize the needs of the poor they are to advocate for them. When others slam shut the door of welcome, they are to open it. After all, Jesus says, “*Behold, I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.*” (Revelation 3:20) Jesus wants to be in Communion with us, but we have to open the door, and we have to be willing to sit at table with everyone else He invites – and He **does** invite **everyone** else. He doesn’t use a battering ram to break in, though. He knocks and we open. If we’re in Communion with Him, we’ll remember well that He lives in the last, the lost and the least. “*When I was hungry you fed me, when I was a stranger, you welcomed me....*” (Matthew 25:35-40) These are sayings we are supposed to take literally.

To be **in** the world but not **of** the world involves pouring ourselves out for others, as our Savior did, who chose to reign from the cross. As Teresa of Avila wrote, we are to be the hands, the feet, the heart of Christ in the world, in this place, at this time, regardless of what anyone else is doing. It was so for a man whose life and ministry we remember this Sunday, November 24. He's new to our calendar of commemorations, and new to me: William Passavant, the first Lutheran pastor to bring Lutheran deaconesses to the U.S. He was born in 1821, a little over 200 years ago, in a place called Zelienople, PA. He was a married parish pastor with children, who somehow also found time to write Lutheran theological treatises, establish hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, a college and a seminary! He had a special heart for the poor. He wrote this, encouraging people to give generously:

We will gratefully receive the mite of the poor and the bounty of the rich towards the rebuilding of this hospital so greatly needed for the sick and suffering over the whole North-west [of PA, I gather!]. Here a little company of Christians are toiling by night and day in ministrations of mercy to the suffering. They only desire a proper shelter for their sick and the stranger within their gates, that they may receive them, minister to them, and heal them in the name of Christ, or prepare them to die in Christ and in peace. For themselves they ask nothing; for these, the poor, the shattered, the afflicted, they ask everything that love can give.¹

Now that's the kind of an agenda Christ our King can get behind! That's Kingdom work that pleases.

There's plenty more to be done, by us. Amen

¹Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 273.

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