

To Feast or Not To Feast
The Rev. Dr. Carole Johannsen
The Last Sunday After Pentecost/The Feast of Christ the King (Proper 29)
November 20, 2022

Last night at the annual Grace Church Thanksgiving Dinner, after we enjoyed turkey, the pot luck offerings of a dozen excellent cooks, including sinful desserts, we were treated to a game of trivia compiled and led by Cecelia Quintero and Dennis Parker, designed to remind us that humility is a desirable Christian trait. But we did come away enlightened: we now know that a nurdle is the blob of toothpaste you squeeze onto your toothbrush, and that croissants are not as French as we thought they were.

But while Dennis and Cecelia had the podium last night... *I have the pulpit today*... and I shall have my revenge for only being able to answer eight of the twenty trivia questions last night. So, this is an interactive sermon. I invite your responses, both Grace parishioners and the visiting People of St. Andrew's.

Question #1: While this day is called the Feast of Christ the King, is it a true feast? Show of hands: Yes? No? Not sure?

- “Yes” (two people)
- “No” (a smattering of hands)
- “Not sure” (most hands.)

The No's are correct, the two “Yes” people would be good Catholics, and the “Not sure” people are where I was when I started to research this day. The Feast of Christ the King is celebrated as a feast day in the Roman Catholic Church, but only here and there in other Christian churches, including our own. It is not listed in the calendar in front of the Prayer Book, General Convention has never established it as a feast, nor is it mentioned anywhere else in our prayer book. For Episcopalians, it is more of a tradition than a feast, and not even that for all our parishes.

Question #2: When and by whom was the Feast of Christ the King established? Guesses?

- Caesar? (way off!)
- Constantine? (closer, but still quite a few centuries off)
- a pope? (Thank you, Tam. Imprecise, but correct)

The Feast of Christ the King was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as *Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Regis*, Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. Europe at that time was living in the cultural chaos caused by WWI and the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic that affected one-third of the world's population. Mussolini was declared *Il Duce* and Fascism had absolute power in Italy, Stalin and Communism were on the rise in Russia, and Hitler, with his obsessive anti-Semitism, and the Nazi party were gaining strength in Germany. Pope Pius saw the spread of secularism and atheism all around him and determined that the world needed to be reminded that the ultimate power was God's in the person of Jesus Christ. The pre-war, pre-pandemic traditions that upheld faith and church-going as central to Christian lives was no longer in place.

And in 1931, when the first formal celebration of the Feast of Christ the King was held, the stock market crash had added to the despair of an already tired and confused populace.

The Feast was originally held on October 31, just before All Saints Day, but in 1969, Pope Paul VI renamed the day and placed it on the last Sunday before Advent. Even our Lutheran siblings, who much preferred to end the Church Year with Reformation Sunday, celebrating their break with Catholicism, accepted the new days. At least, some of them did.

We Americans have mixed feelings about kingship. We broke from a king in the 18th century, and although many of us love the pageantry of royalty in England—I, for one, will be awake in front of my TV

early on May 6 to watch the coronation of King Charles III—but because kings were part of ancient Israel’s tradition, the New Testament is full of references to Jesus as king. HE never said so: you’ll recall the conversation between Jesus and Pilate when Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king and Jesus’ replies “*You* say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” Nevertheless, Pilate brought him before the crowd and announced “Here is your king,” to which the crowd responded, “Away with him.” And again, nevertheless, the word “king” in three languages was nailed to the cross above Jesus’ head. And while some of us, myself included, may prefer to call him Prince of Peace or Good Shepherd, still the title of king, then King of Kings, has stuck and on this day we acknowledge that.

By now you’ve made the connection between the establishment of the Feast and our present time. Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini are gone, but Putin and Kim Jong-un (among others) and the nuclear weaponry they control are still with us. The Spanish Flu is long-gone, but COVID has brought death and critical illness to many people, including our loved ones and fellow parishioners—and will be with us for the foreseeable future. Sunday morning church now competes with sports, with sleeping in, with coffee and the Sunday paper. “Spiritual not religious” is how many people refer to themselves these days, despite what religion they might have known growing up. So again, just as importantly as it was in 1925, it is the Church’s job to proclaim that God is still in charge, overseeing all things and knowing the depths of our souls.

After the Holocaust, many Jewish survivors thanked God for bringing them through the horrors they experienced, but many others abandoned their faith, blaming God for not stopping Hitler sooner and allowing so many, many Jews, Gypsies, and others to perish. Judaism has had to deal with this loss of faith and among the many prayers and hymns written are these beautiful words:

*In a world torn by violence and pain,
a world far from wholeness and peace,
give us the courage to say
There is one God in heaven and earth
The high heavens reveal your glory;
may earth reveal your justice and love.*

* * *

*Though our failings are many and our faults are great
it has been our glory to bear witness to our God,
keeping alive in dark ages
your vision of a world redeemed.*

*Let us continue to work for the day
when the nations will be one and at peace.
Then shall we rejoice as Israel did,
singing on the shores of the Sea.ⁱ*

Question #3 and my last question: Why do we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday of the Church Year? Guesses? (To finish the story before we begin again to tell it?)

Christ the King is by no means the end of the story, but a reminder that the story continues, that Christ is now and ever will be King, Shepherd, Savior, Holy Friend, Lover, Healer, Rabbi and Guide. That in the face of sickness, injustice, violence, poverty and depression: still God is in charge. And that should be celebrated not only today but in our lives every place and every day. Proclaim the sovereignty of God always, not only with your lips, but in your hearts. AMEN.

Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43.

ⁱ *Mishkan T’Filah, a Reform Siddur*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5767/2007, p.15.