

**Proper 29/Christ the King Sunday November 25, 2018**

**Strength of a King**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

He needed to sound like a king. That is the premise of the 2010 multi award winning British historical drama *The King's Speech*, based on the real-life struggles King George VI had overcoming a stammer with the help of a speech therapist. While the movie focuses primarily on the friendship between the king and his speech therapist, and historians like to point out the inaccuracies between the dramatized movie and history, to me, the movie is about the question: what does it take to be a king? The Duke of York - his title before he became king - seemed to be the least likely candidate to become king because he was not the eldest son. And because he had a speech impediment. The movie made it painfully clear with every wince and uncomfortable expression on the face of everyone who listened to the speeches that he gave that when he stammered, the Duke of York failed to sound like the leader the public wanted or needed.

The movie intimates that kings and princes and leaders in general need to speak in ways that make them sound strong, implying they are able to protect their people. What makes the movie and the real-life story so beautiful and meaningful is how King George VI worked hard for years to correct his speech problem, and in the process became friends with the speech therapist who stood by him and worked with him all those years. King George VI exhibited tremendous strength by working through the causes of his stammer. And we feel at the end of the movie that strength is what helped make him a good king.

We don't have kings here in America. But we do have leaders. We have political leaders like the president and members of congress and the senate and governors and mayors. We have business leaders like CEO's. We even have leaders in the church, especially our bishops. And even though there is not a king on the list, there are certain characteristics we expect of good leaders. Perhaps the most important expectation we put on our leaders is strength: we expect and want our leaders to be strong. After all, we put a lot of burdens on their shoulders, and we want to be sure those shoulders can carry them all. Although we don't always agree on what strength is supposed to look like. For some strength is purely physical, being able to lift heavy objects, walk or run for miles, play sports, that sort of thing. For others strength is violence, possessing the ability to physically hurt someone or something or to take another's life. Others seem to think strength is evidenced by the number of people that follow: the bigger the crowd the stronger the leader. Others say strength is found in the amount of money, possessions, or property a person has or is in charge of.

All these characteristics of strength could fit CEOs, politicians, religious leaders and kings. So it is perhaps a strange thing that we use a word that we often think of that represents all these things – the word king- to describe Jesus.

Jesus had none of these characteristics. Jesus did not have much in the way of possessions or wealth. Jesus did not lead a large military. Jesus did not bully people or use force to get his point across. Other than the time he cleansed the temple we never hear of him doing any physical heavy lifting. And although there were times when extremely large crowds showed up to hear what Jesus had to say, his regular followers only numbered a dozen. Jesus never ran for public office, and in some places in John's Gospel we can see he actually runs away from crowds that try and force him to lead them into military rebellion against Rome and thus become king.

Yet *Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews* are the words nailed over his head when he died on the cross, and is what Pilate accused Jesus of in the section of John's Gospel we just heard this morning as we celebrate this Christ the King Sunday. So, what is going on both in the Gospel and today, the last Sunday in the Church Year calendar when we followers of Jesus celebrate him as king and what do these contradictions tell us?

First, the section from today's Gospel is usually read on Good Friday, the day we stand at the cross and Jesus' crucifixion. It is the day we realize quite painfully Jesus is no strong military leader. It is the day we realize quite painfully the people who promised to stand with Jesus couldn't run away fast enough. It is the day we realize Jesus has run out of parables to tell and wisdom to dispense and miracles to perform. It's the day Pilate realized Jesus posed no real physical threat to his king, the Roman Emperor.

For us followers of Jesus there is something even more important to realize: that on that day Jesus showed us more about the Kingdom of God than at any other time in his life. Jesus showed us God's Kingdom isn't about physical boundaries or military might or wealth. It is a way of being, not a place.

That is why Jesus didn't fight back. That is why Jesus didn't play the games of Pilate or Rome or the religious elite of the time. Jesus wasn't vying for his place in a Biblical version of the Game of Thrones, he was showing us God's Kingdom.

That's why when Jesus rose from the dead three days later, he didn't come back fighting mad, armed to the teeth taking out everything and everyone in sight. Instead he showed his followers God's kingdom is about life, resurrection life, and resurrection life beings with forgiveness and then moves into a different way of living where people are free from having to play that Game of Thrones, and instead of vying for places of

power and influence, learn to see all people as God's beloved, which looks like equality, and hope. Jesus resurrection shows us we've got this power and strength and king thing all wrong. It isn't about who can take the most, its simply about living in the new life God's love creates.

That is what brings us to Christ the King Sunday, and why the Church has such a day on its calendar. Of all the celebrations honored by the Church, Christ the King is one of the newest. It was added to the Church calendar in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in the 1920's. Church historians tell us its purpose was to make a statement against the fascism that was rising in Europe after WWI.

You might think it was a good thing for the Church to do, or you may think it is the Church trying to fight fire with fire, or you might not care. But however this day has come to be on our calendar, it does give us an opportunity to look once again at our beliefs as followers of Jesus and how our words and actions reflect those beliefs to the world.

Richard Rohr, a modern Franciscan monk and writer says it this way: If Jesus is Lord (or king) then Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord (or king) then the economy and the stock market are not. If Jesus is Lord (or king) then my possessions, my country, and my job are not. If Jesus is Lord (or King) then I am not. Richard Rohr's words are perfect for Christ the King Sunday because they point us to the ways we as individuals and a parish live and participate fully in this world. Believing Jesus is our king does not excuse us from participating in things like politics, or earning a living, or serving our country. But believing Jesus is our king does mean we can do those things the way we promised in our baptismal vows.

For example, every Sunday in the prayers of the people our prayer leaders pray for the leaders of the nation and the church. Praying for these people does NOT mean we are in any way endorsing them, their behaviors, politics or ideas. We pray for them because they are our leaders and we pray that no matter who they are or what they believe that they will be open to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Another example is the new coffee shop ministry we are starting with our bishop's help called CrossRoads Café. The intention of CrossRoads is not to make the church piles of money, so it is not a business. CrossRoads is – at this point- an experiment to see how we followers of Jesus might participate in our local and world economy in a way that positively touches and affects the lives of the people who live here. By purchasing coffee through Deeper Roots, coffee roasters in Cincinnati, we are actually helping coffee growers in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Ethiopia, and other countries because Deeper Roots purchases their coffee beans directly from local farmers.

Deeper Roots has relationships with their farmers and work with them to develop more sustainable farming practices that also produce high quality coffee beans. The farmers they work with are able to provide for their families and are now helping their local communities. And we are part of that. We are providing not just income but work experience and connection and purpose for our CrossRoads staff. And we are offering our community a place where they can momentarily step out the world of Ohio University, where the University makes a strong case for being king. At CrossRoads people can not only buy a delicious cup of coffee or tea, they can rest a bit, or talk to someone who will listen to them through the volunteers for the listening ministry, connecting them to something larger than themselves. Most importantly, it is one way we can try to show our neighbors what we believe: that Jesus is our king, which means we respect the dignity of every human being and will use what resources we can to help and connect and form relationships.

It's the same with our love our country. As followers of Jesus it is not wrong to love our country. It's a good thing. And because we love it, it is natural to want our country to live into the best it can possibly be, like we want for anyone we love, and it is good to do what we can to be help with that endeavor, which is why many people serve in the military.

All this brings us to the almost harsh sounding if Jesus is king then I am not. But that really is good news. Because it means we don't have to play the game of thrones. We don't have to let our selves be manipulated or abused or treat people in ways that are less than respectful. We don't have to be angry all the time or fight to be the most popular. We don't have to judge our success on the amount of stuff we have or people or money. And it means we don't have to be always busy and always anxious like the world can pressure us to be and instead we can rest when we need to, like Jesus showed us.

This kind of thing can sound both lovely and difficult. Which is where the strength to persevere comes in. And because Jesus is our king, strength doesn't mean being a bully. Such strength is part of God's kingdom and is already a gift given to us. One place you can see what such strength looks like is in the movie *The King's Speech*. It looks like working hard, not giving up, striving, learning from mistakes, forgiving, and befriending; which is how God's Kingdom grows in our hearts and the places we live and work and worship. Can we do it? As we say in our baptismal covenant, I absolutely believe we can, with God's help.