

## **November 20, 2022 - Feast of Christ the King**

### **Deacon Tom Hampson**

It's New Year's Eve! Liturgically speaking. Today is the Feast of Christ the King, when we celebrate the reign of Christ as Lord of all. The cosmic Christ - the author and culmination of all creation - as celebrated in our reading from Colossians. And this feast concludes our liturgical year. Next Sunday we begin a new year in the season of Advent. In liturgical churches like ours (Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox, too) we go to great pains to mark the times and seasons of the year by color, song, reading, and ritual. For us, time matters, because we believe that God, the creator, entered into time by becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The seasons of our year are organized around chapters in the life of Jesus and his church (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost). Through our observance of the seasons of the year in prayer and song, we are invited ever deeper into the life of Jesus, and into the ways his life-giving spirit continues to inspire his church and us. It's a great cosmic drama in which we all have a part to play. A rhythm that seeks to take us ever deeper into the work of God in our midst and the life of God in our hearts. So happy New Year!

The Gospel reading for this Feast of Christ the King might seem an odd one. It's not about glory or power or fame - the things we typically associate with kingship. In fact, as I was reflecting on the passage, I thought that there ought to be a brief warning like you hear in some news casts: "Please note, Some listeners may find these images disturbing". It is a disturbing reading.

Our Gospel passage for this feast, highlights the profound irony, or what St. Paul would call the "foolishness," of the crucifixion. Jesus, the king, is a prisoner, tortured, mocked, his clothing stripped away. It's a scene of utter humiliation and devastation. And with everything stripped away, he's executed on a cross between two criminals. Abandoned, alone, dying a criminals death. A king? really?

The cruel mockery thrown at him by the crowd, religious leaders of the day, the soldiers, even one of the thieves: he saved others, let him save himself! If he's a king, show us your stuff! Prove it! Do these taunts sound familiar? Recall after Jesus baptism by our patron, Saint John, in the river Jordan, Jesus goes into the desert where Satan taunts him with the same sorts of questions: "If you are the Son of God... prove it!"

And I need to confess to you, friends, that there are moments when I've felt that way too - at the bedside of a person with a terminal diagnosis, with someone mourning the loss of a loved one, or while watching a news report of the latest horror - I have said in my heart, like the thief : aren't you the Messiah? Do something!

But Jesus, stripped, humiliated, hung on the cross - reminds me - that's not how he works. He doesn't go in for the Marvel Comics superhero role - instead in the midst of his passion and approaching death, he prays, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing. He doesn't avoid the depths of human suffering by his power - he goes right into the darkest and most painful places. His power is seen in his surrender, in his suffering, in his forgiveness.

This reading reminds us that if we want to meet this king we must go where he goes: to the cross. The cross of our lives - the illness, loss, grief we suffer. The cross of those on the margins, those who are also mocked and derided. Among the poor, in the prison, at the homeless shelter, living under the overpass, with the immigrants, with the LGBTQ community. That's where we meet this king.

We meet this king as we exercise vulnerability and forgiveness. Forgiving those who have harmed us. It's right there in the Lord's prayer. Easy to say, but not so easy to do, that forgiveness. Maybe not even possible, without God's help. And of course that's a big part of our curriculum in our St. John's school for Christian living - learning to forgive, learning to ask for forgiveness.

Twenty years ago, on Oct. 6, 2002, a gunman barricaded himself inside a one-room Amish schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pa. Then he opened fire. "Charlie" Roberts killed five children and injured five others before taking his own life.

The Amish community responded in a way that many found extraordinary: They forgave the shooter. And, in the years since, they have grown close to his family.

Charlie's mother, Terri Roberts recalls, "As I turned on the radio on the way to my son's home, the newscaster was reporting that there had been a shooting at the local Amish schoolhouse. By that time I was there, and I saw my husband and the state trooper standing right in front of me as I pulled in, I looked at my husband, he said, 'It was Charlie.' He said, 'I will never face my Amish neighbors again.' "

That week, the Roberts had a private funeral for their son, but as they went to the gravesite, they saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent.

"Love just emanated from them," Terri says. "I do recall the fathers saying, 'I believe that I have forgiven,' but there are some days when I question that."

Terri finds it especially hard to accept that forgiveness when she thinks of one of the survivors, Rosanna.

"Rosanna's the most injured of the survivors," she explains. "Her injuries were to her head. She is now 15, still tube-fed and in a wheelchair. And she does have seizures, and when it gets to be this time of year, as we get closer to the anniversary date, she seizes more. And it's certainly not the life that this little girl should have lived."

Terri asked if it would be possible for her to help with Rosanna once a week. "I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair," says Terri, who herself is battling cancer. And, while she

can't say it with 100 percent certainty, Terri believes Rosanna knows who she is. "I just sense that she does know," she says.

"I will never forget the devastation caused by my son," says the 65-year-old Terri. "But one of the fathers the other night, he said, 'None of us would have ever chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it, you can't put a price on that.' "

"And their choice to allow life to move forward was quite a healing balm for us," she says. "And I think it's a message the world needs."

Indeed we do need that message. The message of a crucified king who's last act was to forgive those who killed him. May we embrace that message. Live that message. Today and everyday in the coming new year. Amen.