



**The Last Sunday after Pentecost**  
**November 22, 2009**  
**The Rev. Douglas E. Remer**

In preparation for writing this sermon, I spoke this past week with our former rector, Father Peterson, who confirmed the stories I had heard about the copper Christus Rex that now hangs to my left on the south transept wall. If you've never bothered to study that piece, take some time after the service this morning to look at it. And then give me your opinion about it. I would be curious to see if opinions today are as divided as they were when it was first installed during Father Brickman's tenure as rector. And that is the story that I had heard and that Father Peterson confirmed: that the copper Christus Rex has a history as a very controversial work of art, so much so, in fact, that it has been moved all over the church because so many people didn't want to see it. I'd be curious to know if that is the general reaction today as well.

For those of you who don't know the rest of the story, here it is in a nutshell: Father Brickman had befriended and assisted an itinerant artist who was either commissioned to make the copper Christus Rex or did it of his own volition as a sign of his gratitude for Father Brickman's help. I gather that the artist, at least back then, was in some ways as controversial as the artwork he produced. He was, I think, just a grade above a street person, back in a time when Church inclusiveness was hardly the byword that it is today. And the work itself sparked as much debate as the artist. It is not your usual depiction of Christus Rex—Christ the King. Compare, for example, the Christus Rex with the Christus Rex portrayed in the stained glass window on the east wall of the church behind the altar. And note the differences.

I thought of those differences this week when I viewed pictures of Queen Elizabeth II, enthroned in the House of Lords, giving her speech during the annual State Opening of Parliament. The Queen of England and the trappings of both the occasion and the venue are about as regal as one can get. On that count, you have to hand it to the British: they have monarchy and regality packaged exactly as we average folks like to imagine things royal. From the bejeweled crown to the gilded carriage to the liveried pages and attendants, from the pomp of procession with stately horse guards to centuries-old acts of obeisance done by old men with marvelously delicious titles like Lord Great Chamberlain and Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, the British do it best. And that's the way we like it, too, because it confirms every notion of what we think royalty is all about.

That's also why the Christus Rex stained glass window in this church is so beloved by most of

us: not only is it a fine work of art, but it depicts the kind of regal Christ in whose kingdom we would be most happy to live. After all, what's the sense in having a kingdom if you can't have a regal king? Nobody wants a king who gets his duds at Walmart. Kings need to be dressed up in order for us to bow down.

Which explains, no doubt, the mixed response to our copper Christus Rex. It is, you see, a split image: the left-hand side is a typical Christus Rex, complete in this case with a royal crown and a priestly stole; the right-hand side, however, is something altogether different, the crown a crown of thorns, with hand and foot pierced by the nails of the Cross. The left-hand side depicts our idea of God's kingdom; the right-hand side depicts God's idea of his kingdom. And the kingdom of God is the theme for this Last Sunday after Pentecost, known unofficially as Christ the King Sunday.

Interestingly, these differing images of God's kingdom can be seen in the Scripture lessons we've heard read this morning. From Psalm 93 we hear of the royal God: "The Lord is King; he has put on splendid apparel; the LORD has put on his apparel and girded himself with strength." Contrast that with the scene from John's Gospel [18:33-37], where a soon-to-be scourged and crucified Jesus is brought before a cynical Pilate: "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says, to which Pilate replies, "So you are a king?" But Jesus goes on to say, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And with that, every notion that we have of a regal king and royal kingdom is thrown out the door. The Truth, Jesus says, stands before you. You may mock and deride that Truth, you may even attempt to kill that Truth. But the Truth is the Word of God, and the Word of God is the final word.

Christ the King presents himself not in regal finery, seated upon a throne, but naked and nailed to a tree; not as the master of a household of footmen and servants, but as the servant and Savior of all. That is the truth of God's kingdom, spoken by the Truth himself. And what is true of Christ the King is true also of Christ's kingdom: it is, in an oft-used phrase, a kingdom turned upside down, a kingdom where some who are now first will be last, and where some who are now last will be first. It is a kingdom, St. Paul says, whose very foundation is nothing less than faith, hope, and love.

It is little wonder, then, that this kingdom, like our copper Christus Rex, can sometimes be so off-putting. Neither is what we would want or expect. But both speak the truth, both about God and about ourselves. This same God who sacrificed his Son calls for sacrifice from us: not generally a physical death, but a death to the kind of self-centered, self-serving, self-caring cravings in life which we so often find so alluring. Instead, God bids us to live lives of sacrificial giving, lives which reflect and honor the Gospel's imperative to love and serve others as the hallmark of our love for God and our Baptismal promise to follow and obey him as our Lord. These are not lofty goals or the stuff of theological argument. They are, rather, the very stuff of life. In this kingdom, it is sacrifice and service that wear the royal purple.

Jesus told Pilate, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And, on this last Sunday in the Church Year, that is the last word. God has spoken. Are you listening?

Amen.

*This sermon was preached by the Reverend Douglas E. Remer in Saint John's Church, Tampa, Florida, on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2009.*

*Last Pentecost-Christ the King November 22, 2009*