

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the first born of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. So we read today in our epistle.

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. It is the time in which we elevate and celebrate our Lord as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the history of this celebration is pretty interesting. It started not in the early church. It started actually in 1925. Pope Pius XII when he was looking at the world around him, saw a rise in nationalism and fascism, and he wanted to create a kind of condition in which people would begin to see that the Christ that they worshiped was greater than the nation that claimed their loyalty.

And so he wrote an encyclical, and that encyclical gave birth to a feast day. And that feast day continues to this very day. And it would be tempting to take that cyclical written in 1925 and to simply apply it to the world we live in today, in which there is again, a rise of nationalism and fascism.

And it would be tempting for me to give you a very political sermon, much in the same vein that Pius XII gave. But there are two reasons why I can't give that sermon today. The first is that it didn't work in 1925. No one listened. And the second is that I might say something that some of you might enjoy. I might say something that I myself will enjoy. I might walk away thinking that I had done a great thing because I shared with you political views that you can find on CNN or Fox news, wherever you might go.

But I would not be actually speaking to what I think is the crux in every sense of that word of the matter. Because Pius XII wanted us to see the deep connection we have with each other through Christ. And that deep connection we have with one another through Christ is a kind of connection that is deeper than nationhood, that is deeper than race or ethnicity. It is a connection that cuts to the core of what it means to be human, and it pivots on something that we are deeply afraid to talk about, to say that Christ is King, to say that the God who came to us as Jesus Christ who suffered, wept, was crucified and died is King, is to say something incredibly powerful about death.

And that is dangerous terrain to talk about Christ and death because we all tend to fear death. Death is the thing that troubles us more than anything else. We spend an enormous amount of time trying to compartmentalize the experience of death in the modern age, and we spend an enormous amount of time psychologically living in denial of our own death. And we live in a world in which death is unavoidable and yet somehow unspeakable, and yet it is death that all of us have a kind of connection to each other.

All of us will die. All of us will know death now in one form or another physically, certainly. But all of us will experience death in one form or another during our lives. The

death of a career, the death of a relationship, the death of a marriage, the death of the joy we feel in our hearts, the disease that we struggle with, death comes to us all, and each of us experiences that death somewhat differently as we grieve. And yet the good news of Christianity is that Christ is King and Lord over death and the kingship of Christ is no more apparent than at the moment in which we read in today's gospel as he is being put to death. He says to the criminal, "Today, you'll be with Me in paradise."

Christ leans into His own death because He believes in his own resurrection, and that resurrection is the promise of paradise. It's a promise we experience when we go through death and find in it life, and that is the pivot around which the gospel turns. We find it not only in today's reading from the gospel of Luke, but it's also in the reading I began with from our epistle.

He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the first born of the dead so that he might come first place, might have first place in everything, and this is the clear promise of Christ in Paul's letter to the Romans in which we read, "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. The death He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Christianity at its core makes a statement about death. And it stares death straight in the eye, and it proclaims the Lordship of Christ. And in the face of that, there is an either/or decision that we make every time we have a baptism. We turn away and renounce the power of sin and death and the Devil, because those three are always linked. Because sin and death and the Devil are all examples of separation from God. And we turn and we affirm Jesus as our Lord, our life giver, and our liberator. And so we claim and join Him in saying that death has no dominion over us as death had no dominion over Christ.

Now, this is a somber topic to talk about right before Thanksgiving when I'm about to baptize little ones. There might even be little ones here. It's a bit terrifying to bring up death in front of children, isn't it? But I want to suggest to you that children know more about death than any of us want to admit.

That in fact, we are the ones often struggling with the denial, and we are the ones who are afraid of the vulnerability of talking about death with a child. And that vulnerability perhaps stands behind the fact that Pius XII, though certainly a good Christian, chose to engage in privi-litical rhetoric, rather than the rhetoric of the gospel. But children can know about death and they can have the reactions you and I have, and those reactions are important for us to keep an eye on.

A few years ago, we had a little boy come into the church from Brookside School for a tour. And he came along to this part of the tour right over here where there's this vision of Jesus being crucified between two criminals. He had never been in a Christian Church before. He took one look at that Jesus dying and he screamed out, "This is horrible. Why would you bring me to a place like this? I thought this was a beautiful place."

He would not pipe down. They finally had to separate him, and Pastor Joyce had to come and sit next to him to try to calm him down, but he refused. Why? Because he knew what it was about and it was us who had been denying the role of death. We had been the ones who had been lost in the providence of the art, and we missed the message of the gospel because to say that Jesus is Lord over death is the promise everything we can promise, and it's to speak the gospel with no accent straightforward.

On the bulletin cover today, you have an incredible painting by Édouard Manet. It was done in 1865. In it you see this Christ enthroned on a beautiful sheet accompanied by angels, and He is dead. And when this painting was exhibited in Paris in 1864, the church was in arms because Christ looked too human, too real. The message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ is that our Lord reigns even in death. And as difficult as that is for us to see, as vulnerable as that makes us, that is the way in which we understand how profound Christ's love is for us.

On June 7th, 1968, Fred Rogers was in the first year of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, and he suddenly was confronted with a moment, what do I say to a child about death? Because the assassination of Bobby Kennedy happened and it was all over the news, and it was the spectacle – the first time in the history of television that people could recreate and play again and again that scene in which he was assassinated.

And so Mr. Rogers created this incredible skit in which he played Daniel, the Striped Tiger talking to Lady Aberlin. And he brought out a balloon to her, and Daniel asked Lady Aberlin to blow up the balloon and the balloon, after she blew it up, she let the air slowly out and Daniel said, "What happened to the air in the balloon?"

And Lady Aberlin said, "Well, the air in the balloon joined the air around us." And Daniel said, "Is that the big air?" She said, "Yes." And then Daniel said, "What is assassination?" And Lady Aberlin said, "It's when someone is suddenly killed by another." And Daniel said to her, "Is that what happened when that man killed that man?" And Lady Aberlin said, "Yes, do you want to talk about it?" And Daniel said, "Not right now. I need to be alone."

And Lady Aberlin said that she was going to go on a picnic and asked Daniel if he wanted to come, but he said no, but before she left, she blew up the balloon and gave it back to him. Now, this was a kind of coded message that Fred Rogers is famous for doing, a kind of commentary on death and resurrection.

And after the skit, Mr. Rogers said that the most important thing for us to do is not to shield our children from talking about death, but it's actually to include them in the way our families deal with difficult issues. And some families want to watch a funeral on the TV screen and that was fine. Just watch it together. And some families like to handle death by walking along a riverbank. And Mr. Rogers said that was fine, but do it together.

And he said in some families, they just need a strong arm to come around the shoulders of a little one, and that's fine too. And he finishes the broadcast by saying, "I always say to the

children, you've made this day special just by being you – and you have. I care deeply about you and your family. I hope you know that.”

So death is unavoidable. It is disturbing. It comes in many forms, but you and I believe in a Jesus whose love is stronger than death. Earlier this summer, I was visiting one of our beloved parishioners as she was dying. And I got to the hospital at about 5:00 in the morning and I prayed for her. And then I came back when her family was there and I turned to her daughters who are very young, and I said, “This is your decision. You can come in with me and we can bless your grandma together, or you can wait right here in the waiting room and I promise you I will do everything I can to make sure she's prayed for.” And those young ladies decided to come in and to help me to bless their grandma. And it's in that moment, I think, that a deep connection is made between ourselves and God and between one another and Christ. And it is that connection that will hold this world together as that vulnerability of proclaiming the gospel in the midst of sadness that will redeem us all because we believe, to return once more to Paul's letter from the Romans, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And so today we give thanks for Christ the King. May he reign forever. May he restore all things. Amen.

[End of Recording]