
Is it Faith in Christ or Faith of Christ?

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King, Year C

We have finally come to the end of the liturgical year. We have walked with Jesus through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and all those long, green, growing Sundays of the summer.

And here we stand at the culmination of it all.

In 1925, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius XI declared this Sunday to be Christ the King Sunday. He saw the rising tide of nationalism sweeping across Europe and the threat it posed to the Church. His hope was to remind Christians that our ultimate allegiance—our truest citizenship—is in the kingdom of God.

We were a little late to the party. The Episcopal Church didn't observe the feast until the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book, and even then we softened the title at the Cathedral. We call it The Reign of Christ. But the idea is the same. Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven, and this Sunday asks us to consider its power and its shape.

Now, kingdom simply means reign -- the extent of one's influence, the territory over which one has authority. Each of us has a "kingdom," the space in which our choices matter. And the proclamation of Christ's reign is the invitation to align our little kingdoms with his.

You might think the key to this alignment is simply having faith in Christ: learning about him, agreeing with what we've learned, joining the right group, maintaining moral purity, and in the end receiving our reward in heaven.

That's the version many of us absorbed.

And it's not a bad place to start. It is good to learn about Jesus. It is good to care about our behavior. But as T. S. Eliot reminded us, we are forever trying to design good systems without requiring good people. In other words, it's not only about what we do; it's about who we are. Our doing flows out of our being.

The apostle Paul knew this well. In Galatians and Philippians he speaks not only of faith in Christ, but of the faith of Christ—Christ's own trust in God, the trust that carried him to the cross, that sustained his self-giving love, that enabled him to forgive even those who killed him.

We can start with faith in Christ. But to grow into the kingdom of God, we must mature toward the faith of Christ. And that presents a challenge, because many of us aren't sure anymore what God's voice sounds like.

There was a time when people spoke easily of God speaking to them. Now, if someone says "God told me...", most of us start looking for the exit or a cup of coffee.

Andy Root, a Lutheran professor, once conducted a study in the Pacific Northwest. He interviewed twelve faithful Presbyterian and Methodist parishioners, all recommended by their pastors. He asked whether God had ever spoken to them. Every single one said no—and added that they wouldn't trust anyone who claimed otherwise. They assumed it was emotional manipulation.

Except... in every interview, one moment emerged when the person hesitated and said, "Well... maybe once."

And then there was Rachel.

Rachel was a single mother of two. She had little patience for theological abstractions. Root had an hour scheduled; she was finished in twenty-four minutes. Two-sentence answers. Foot tapping. And nearly every sentence included, “Because I’m a single mother...”

Finally, in a moment of desperation, Root asked whether she had ever felt the presence of Christ—ever experienced a moment when God simply had to be there.

She paused.

Then she said, “Yes.”

She had told him she was a single mother. She had not told him why. Her children’s father had flown to Chicago on a short trip. Thirteen hours later, a call came from a man whose voice she didn’t recognize. He stumbled through half-sentences until he finally forced out the words: “I’m sorry. Your husband died last night in his sleep. You’ll need to come to Chicago to identify the body.”

She said the color drained out of the world. Everything was black and white, like The Wizard of Oz in reverse. She looked at her children in the next room and realized her life—as she knew it—was over.

She wrote down the address of the morgue, found someone to watch the kids, and boarded the short flight that felt like ten days. In Chicago, she handed the cab driver the business card because she couldn’t speak.

That driver recognized the address. For reasons he could never explain, he felt he needed to go in with her. He parked the cab, got out, and followed her inside—holding only a bottle of water and a vague sense that something was asking this of him.

When the attendants pulled the sheet back from the gurney, Rachel almost collapsed. And at that exact moment, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and that same bottle of water appear in front of her.

“It was,” she said, “as if the presence of Christ was there.”

The connection—unasked for, unexplainable—gave her enough strength to stand, even to imagine a future.

She turned and saw the cabbie.

Fragile. Vulnerable. Intentional.

That connection, she said, was the presence of Christ.

This—this movement toward one another in love—is the voice of God. This is the reign of Christ. Sharing one another’s burdens. Standing with one another in the valley of the shadow. Bringing life out of death simply by showing up.

So on this Feast of the Reign of Christ, I want to suggest that we come to church not to gather information about Jesus, not merely to strengthen our faith in Christ, but to enter into the kind of relationships through which we learn the faith of Christ.

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, when we offer our presence to one another, when we let compassion draw us where logic never would—there we learn what God’s voice sounds like. There we feel the presence of Christ. There we grow into disciples whose being shapes our doing.

And in doing so, we help usher in the kingdom.

Amen.