

Pizza, Toads, and Christ the King

a sermon for Christ the King Sunday given
by
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Today is the last Sunday of Pentecost, or, as they say in England, the Sunday next before Advent. And the Sunday next before Advent is Christ the King Sunday. In some places it is called the Sunday of the Reign of Christ because some people are uncomfortable with the idea of Christ as king. While I respect that point of view, I'm not sure why it is okay to speak of Christ's reign, but it's not okay to speak of Christ as a king, so I'll leave that to better minds to deal with. But I will note that a student at Princeton once told me his thoughts on this minor controversy in the church. He said "I never had problem with the fact that God is above me on the organizational chart."

Maybe it's better to speak not of the reign of Christ, since that can make the conversation sound hierarchical and triumphant, but instead to speak of the reign of divine love. That's what we're really talking about.

Although there are many biblical references to Christ as king, it might surprise you to know that the actual liturgical observance of Christ the King Sunday does not have a very long history. Pope Pius XI decreed that the Feast of Christ the King should be observed in 1925 to make the point that Christians owe their primary allegiance to their spiritual ruler — Christ — as opposed to earthly supremacy, which was at that time boldly claimed by Benito Mussolini.

When we think of Christ the King, fairy tale images of kings on thrones wearing jeweled robes can crowd our minds. But thinking about how Christ is the one central figure in our lives, as opposed to anything in the world, is always a useful exercise for Christians. It starts with a careful examination within each one of us about who Christ is for us and how we relate to Christ in our own lives. This is more

complicated than it at first sounds and it takes us to a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Christ as king than a fairy tale version does.

So under the general heading of “the reign of Christ” — of Christ’s centrality in our lives — I would like to invite you to ponder how we relate to God as adults instead of relating to God as though we were still children listening to fairy tales. Sometimes I think the church tries to get its message across to adults using styles of communication that are better suited to children.

So I want to talk with you about pizza — and toads.

First pizza. As a kid I thought all pizza was oblong because the only guy in our town who made pizza in the 50’s and 60’s was from Campania in southern Italy where, evidently, all pizza is, in fact, oblong. And since we rarely went anywhere else, I thought pizza was oblong everywhere.

Then I got to college in another state and was astounded to learn that most people think pizza should be round. Now I think round pizza is the norm and oblong pizza is, well, a little strange.

We often begin to believe things in certain ways as children and hold on to those beliefs when we become adults. Sometimes that’s just kind of cute like when you meet an adult who thinks unicorns were real, but just extinct.

There are religious ideas like that too, ideas that you got as a kid and still might have as an adult. Like the belief that if you bite the communion wafer you’re hurting Jesus. Kids used to be told this to emphasize the real presence of Christ in the bread. So, there was kind of an understandable reason for telling kids this — to emphasize that the bread is more than bread — something holy.

But you can’t really have any success emphasizing a truth with a lie, now, can you?

Another example of a childish idea persisting into adulthood is the idea that a beautiful symbolic story is literally true in every detail and trumps modern scientific knowledge – such as the idea that God literally created the earth and all that is in it in 6 days and rested on the 7th.

A moment’s reflection will reveal how this is a theological understanding designed for children, not adults:

First, for God time is meaningless – God is timeless and before there were humans, there was no reckoning of time.

Second, the physical evidence we have suggests the world developed over billions of years.

And third, do you really think God needs a day off? Really?

But the idea persists just like my oblong pizza idea sticks in my head and so there are controversies about how science should be taught in the schools.

But sometimes the consequences of carrying around childish ideas as adults can be an even more serious problem for us. Like the idea that you have to earn God's love or God's acceptance.

How did that crazy idea ever get started, anyway?

If God is love, then God can't help but love us unconditionally, no matter who we are or what we do, right? It is in the very nature of God to love us unconditionally. I once heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa preach that God has very low standards. God accepts everybody.

So how did people come to think that you have to earn points with God to be okay with God?

Ideas about God that might work for children but don't work for adults can be very destructive. People can be emotionally harmed for the rest of their lives by them. And some people, when they realize they have been misled about God's nature, reject everything, even God.

This brings me to toads.

My Dad told me when I was a small boy that if I touched a toad I'd get warts on my hands. In fact, I had a wart on my thumb for a while when I was a kid and my Dad said, "Well, you must have touched a toad."

Years later I asked my Dad why he told me that and he said he really didn't know anything about toads, but generally thought it was probably healthier if I didn't pick them up, and so he told me about the warts to scare me off. And then he said, "I thought you'd eventually grow up and find out the truth and get over it." I said, "Dad, I'm 39 years old and I still think you get warts from toads, so I'm not over it!"

This is about something called social control. If breaking rules has consequences, fewer people will break rules. If you tell people they'll go to hell if they do this or that, or don't do this or that, you can control what they do.

But a faith based on fear really isn't faith at all. And it doesn't reflect the true nature of God or the reality of how Christ reigns in the world.

So, as Christian adults we have work to do. We have to examine what childish ideas about God we've been carrying around all our lives and try to come to a newer, life-giving understanding of how God relates to us and how we relate to God. This is difficult work because the ideas we had drilled into us as children do not change easily. But some of those childish ideas are standing in between us and a closer relationship with God — standing in the way of Christ's reign — and so the effort is worth it.

How do you think about God – who and what is God, anyway? Who is Jesus Christ for you? And how do you think about what is right and wrong and what will bring you closer to God or keep you far from God? How do those ideas fit together? What are the oblong pizzas and the toads of your spiritual life? Can you even identify what they are? What are you doing about them?

To help you get a little farther along on this spiritual quest to know Christ as Christ longs to be known by you as adults, to help you get beyond the way a child thinks about God, I'd like to leave you with a very challenging saying attributed to Jesus from the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is not part of the official Bible and is considered by some to be heretical. It was found near Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945 among a trove of books that had been hidden in a clay jar for almost 2,000 years. It is just a list of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus that were passed down by monks living in the Egyptian desert in the very earliest days after Jesus' time on earth. And we can imagine those monks meditating on these sayings and trying to figure out for themselves who Jesus is and their relation to the Christ — to come to a deeper understanding of who Christ is. Which is exactly what we have to do for ourselves.

So, listen carefully and see if this doesn't challenge you and open a new way — a more adult way — of thinking about Christ the King, not as a fairy tale king, but

about who Christ is in your adult life. And the first thing I want you to notice is that this saying is in the present tense, not the past tense:

Jesus says: "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will get there first. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will will get there first. Rather, the kingdom is within you, and outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will know that you are the children of God."¹

Let us pray:

Most Gracious God, who in Jesus of Nazareth showed us an alternative to the kings, queens and emperors of history, help us to revere and emulate Jesus' leadership: To love, and to seek justice for all people. Help us to recognize the true grandeur and life-changing power based in loving you and all of our neighbors. In Christ Jesus with you and the Holy Spirit, may we co-create a new world ruled not through domination, but in that radical and all-powerful compassion and love.²

Amen.

¹ Gospel of Thomas 3 in Nag Hammadi Library 118; Eliane Pagels translation.

² Adapted from a Collect for Christ the King Sunday used by All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA.