

**Feast of Christ the King, Year A –
St. Monica's: November 23, 2014
11 a.m. – Youth Mass**

Ezekiel 34:11-17: The good Shepherd seeks out the lost, rescues the strayed, binds up the wounded ... and judges between sheep and goats.

Psalms 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd: I shall not want."

I Corinthians 15:20-28: "The risen Christ will hand over the Kingdom to Father, having conquered every ruler, authority and power – even death ."

Matthew 25:31-46: "The Son of Man will reward the good and punish the evil: "whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it for me."

When you think of kings or queens, who comes to mind? (Elizabeth II ... Charles and Camilla ... Will and Kate?) What about historical ones – or even fictional ones? (Jadis, the White Witch – or the children in LWW who replace her as kings and queens of Narnia? The Tudors?) When you think of a king or queen, what qualities do you associate with them? (Rich, well-born, stylish, powerful, etc.)

Today, we acclaim Jesus as our King. But just what kind of King is Jesus, anyway? Was Jesus born in a palace? (A stable.) Did Jesus grow up in a big city, in a rich and powerful family? (The son of a carpenter, worked with his hands, lived in a small village.) Did Jesus go around dressed in fine robes and wearing a jeweled crown? (No ... he dressed simply, no frills. The only crown he ever wore was made of not gold, but ... thorns.)

So when we call Jesus a King, we have to be very important to define what we mean by that. One of my favourite parts of the Harry Potter books something we learn at the end of the very first book, when Professor Dumbledore tells Harry the reason he carries a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. It is because as a small baby, his parents died defending him from the attack of the Dark Lord Voldemort. He tells Harry:

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, not a visible sign ... but to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin."

We too have been sealed by love. We have been protected against the power of evil by someone who was willing to lay down his life, out of love, so that we might live. Hopefully, we all know who that person is? (JESUS!) And this is why we hail Jesus as leader – best friend – as Good Shepherd – as our King.

When we were baptized, when the priest or deacon plunged us into the water of life and anointed us with holy chrism, we were marked by God, sealed with love. Christ came to live inside of us, inviting us to share in his identity and his calling: to be “priest, prophet, and king”, just like him. In baptism, ratified in Confirmation, Jesus shares his royal identity with us. If Jesus is King of Kings, then it follows that we too possess a royal dignity: we are his brothers and sisters, with God as our common Father.

So if Jesus is our King, **how** should we be following him? In life, we all have to make choices. What kind of person do I want to be? Where do I belong? How do I want to live my life? In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola describes this as a choice between **two standards**. (The standard was the “flag” used to lead the troops in battle. Either you were on one side, or the other. You couldn’t fight for both sides. You had to choose.) One is the standard of riches, pride, honours, success, and power: the way the “kings and rulers” of this world, the politicians and the captains of industry of this world often live. They use their power to dominate others, to exploit them, to keep them down. The other is the standard of Christ, whom we meet in today’s readings as “The Good Shepherd”. His way is poverty, simplicity, compassion, and suffering. Jesus is not a powerful king, living in a palace; he is the servant-king, poor and humble among the poor and humble of this world.

So we must choose: which king do we want to follow? What kind of leaders will we be ourselves? Who will we follow? Will we choose to do good, or evil? The battle is real, and is played out today: in fact and fiction, in newspapers and movies, on our TV newscasts and in our imaginations. Whether it’s Katniss Everdeen leading the rebellion against the Capitol in *Mockingjay*, the latest instalment of the *Hunger Games* franchise, or the decision of Pope Francis not to move into the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican but stay in a modest guest-house, we all have choices to make.

Last week, I was at ecumenical meetings in Toronto with my good friend, Bishop Don Bolen of Saskatoon. He shared with me that at his request, the

diocese had just sold his beautiful residence on the North Saskatchewan River. He has now moved into a 2-bedroom apartment in a working-class Saskatoon neighbourhood. He said it was something he had been thinking of doing for a while, and that Pope Francis' example gave him the courage to make the choice. That's called walking the talk, or using the expression of Pope Francis, "being a Shepherd with the smell of the sheep."

Of course, the danger of calling Jesus a "King" is that it is a title Jesus very rarely claims for himself. On the one hand, the idea of what Jesus calls "the kingdom of God" is absolutely central to his preaching: his parables reveal diverse, unexpected insights into the "Reign of God", into what the world looks like when God is allowed to reign. Jesus' own healings, miracles, and mighty deeds announce that Kingdom and make it real. But whenever someone tries to make Jesus king – most notably after he fed the crowds by multiplying the loaves and fishes – Jesus escapes into the hills, gets as far away as possible. As he tells Pilate at his trial, "my kingdom is not of this world."

For Jesus is a king crowned not with gold, but thorns. His throne is not made of marble and precious stones, but an "old rugged cross". Most notably, it is from the Cross that Jesus reigns triumphant. Hanging on the instrument of his torture and death, he holds the keys of eternal life. To the repentant thief who implores, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he responds: "Today you will be with me in paradise." In his Resurrection, Jesus makes this promise of eternal life open to all of us who seek God with a sincere heart, who respond with loving compassion to the needs of others. As we hear in today's Gospel, to those who have recognized him and responded to him by feeding, clothing, sheltering and visiting "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine," Jesus says: "Come, you beloved of my Father: share in the joy of your Lord."

It was only in 1925 that the liturgical feast commemorating Christ under this title of King of the Universe was introduced into the Church calendar. That may sound like ancient history, but by Catholic Church standards, that's practically last week! Why did Pope Pius XI do this? Interestingly enough, it was because he saw the world turning into a very secular place: marked by anti-clericalism and religious indifference, rejecting any role for the Church or for faith and religious values in public education or civil society. (Gee, sound familiar?)

So the Pope decided to introduce a new feast. Why? To remind political leaders and opinion-makers that all authority ultimately comes from God through Christ, and that in the end, they are accountable to God for the way in which they lead and guide the nations they serve.

Pope Pius' intentions were good: he wanted society to become more just, loving, and Christian. But the idea backfired a little. Because when you say "King", most people think "earthly King". They portrayed Christ as a triumphant action-hero, riding on the clouds of heaven, scepter in hand and golden crown on his head, judging over all the nations, rewarding all the good people (i.e. people like us) by sending them to heaven, and punishing the evil ones (our enemies, those different "from us") forever.

Yes, Jesus is our King. But His kingdom is not "of this world." When we were baptized, we promised to become followers of Christ the King, to share his Good News with those around us. These words were spoken to us (through our parents and godparents) when the priest anointed our foreheads with holy chrism. They were renewed and ratified at confirmation so we could receive the fullness of God's spirit and thereby share in his mission:

"God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his Body, sharing everlasting life."

The way we lead has to be inspired and shaped by the way Jesus leads. Jesus bears witness to peace, integrity, forgiveness, justice and freedom – and so must we, in our dealings with the world and with one another. It is tempting to put Jesus up on a glorious throne and worship him from afar. It's a lot harder to face Jesus as a King hanging from a Cross – and hear him say, "where I have gone, you too must follow." But there is no other way. Jesus' kingship reveals to us that the path to glory passes through suffering, that there is no Resurrection without the Passion. Jesus models for us a new form of leadership: it is not about domination and control, but about humble service. So let us embrace our call to Christian leadership. Let us be good shepherds who "have the smell of the sheep." Let us embrace our vocation in baptism and confirmation, to be "priest, prophet, and king", chosen and called, anointed by the Holy Spirit. Amen.