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Christ the King: Generous Love and a Crucified Lord

Good morning! It is a privilege and an honor to be with you at Christ the King on the Feast of Christ the King. It's sort of like being in Dublin on St. Patrick's Day, or maybe New Orleans at Mardi Gras. Well, maybe not like that. But it is special and I'm glad to be here.

Have you ever wondered why we call today, "Christ the King?" You might think of this as historical trivia, but on December 11, 1925, Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical, "Quas Primas,"—I'm sure you've all read it—designated a special day to celebrate the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

His decision to celebrate "Christ the King" is an interesting choice. We could have had "Christ the Redeemer," or "Christ the Healer," or any number of perhaps equally appropriate alternatives. If an American had made the call, we might be celebrating "Christ the President." But even to those of us born in America, where we really don't understand monarchy, that doesn't sound quite right.

However, in 1st century Judea, Jews (and Gentiles) had a pretty clear idea of the ways in which a ruler should look and act. The king typically had absolute power, including that of life or death over his subjects. He would have lived in some sort of palace, worn fancy clothes, and had lots of attendants. He might even have mastered that peculiar feature of royalty, the royal wave.

That is not the picture of Jesus we get from today's Gospel reading. Instead, he is nailed to a cross, mocked and taunted by Jews and Romans alike. His death is as humiliating as it is inevitable.

Yet this figure on the cross is the person we celebrate today as Christ the King. How do we even begin to reconcile the vastly different images of the triumphal, majestic ruler and of the crucified Jesus?

It isn't easy. At least for me, part of the problem in visualizing Jesus as king comes from the distinction our culture makes between political and religious leaders. Monarchs today have secular authority, but in John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus' kingdom "is not from this world." It is tempting to use this scripture to help overcome the disparity we perceive between Christ the sufferer and Christ the King. From an intellectual standpoint, it is much easier to accept Christ's kingship if we believe that the Jesus on the cross is of this world, and the triumphant Christ is of the next.

But as much as we would like to keep the two worlds separate, that isn't the way it works. God is not limited by our conventions, and Christ's kingdom is not confined to the afterlife—it is here, today, right now.

In Christ, God became incarnate so that we could see and experience God's nature as fully as possible. That revelation—God revealed in Christ—created an eternal and unbreakable bond

between this world and the next. It established God's kingdom on "earth as it is in heaven," with Christ as its king.

There is another point—subtle but important—that helps me understand how the kingdom of God encompasses both earthly and heavenly realms. The word in both Greek and Hebrew for "kingdom" has more than one meaning. It also indicates the manner in which the king rules.

If Jesus teaches us anything from his ministry on earth, it is that God's is all about love. God's love for us is infinite, unbounded, and unconditional. And just as God loves us, we are called to love God and each other.

Jesus is king because God's love surrounds and infuses everything. It is the most powerful force in the universe. Jesus is king because he is the embodiment of God.

Now, your vicar and deacon are expecting a stewardship sermon, and right about now they are undoubtedly wondering, "When is this guy going to get to the stewardship part?"

I already have.

To me, stewardship is about love—the defining quality of God's kingdom and Christ's rule. Stewardship is not about pledging, or gifts of talent, or giving an extra five, ten, or twenty dollars per week to the church. Oh, those things can and should take place, but they are the mechanics of stewardship, not its meaning.

Stewardship is, above all, about love. It is about responding to God's gift of infinite love with our own humble and highly imperfect imitation. Stewardship is about sharing what we have with others, just as God has shared all of creation with us.

In a way, stewardship resembles our relationships with those we love. Some of us have children, all of us have or have had families. When my children—who are grown now—needed something—food, clothing, lunch money, a Sony Play Station or Nintendo X-Box—I didn't give it to them because someone told me it was the right thing to do, or because I was afraid I might feel guilty if I didn't. I gave them what they needed—and often more than they really needed—because I love them. It's that simple.

Stewardship should be like that. Things we do for the church, whatever those might be, should be done with the same spirit of love and joy that we feel for our children, or our families, or others whom we love. We take care of the people we love precisely because we love them, and we should give of ourselves to the church because we love God. It's that simple, and it's that hard.

In reality, it took me a long time to get to the point where I was giving money to the church out of love rather than a sense of obligation, and honestly, at times I still struggle with it. It takes faith and the willingness to trust that God will provide what we need, even when we think we need that money more than God does.

I'll never forget the first year that I made a significant increase in my pledge, and by significant I mean a few hundred dollars per year. The total amount isn't particularly important, but I was recently divorced and considered myself, at least by previous standards, fairly poor. Pledging that much was scary. But I stuck to my pledge, and, somewhat surprisingly, at the end of the year I had still managed to do all the things that were important to me. So the next year I increased my pledge again, and the next year even more. In a few years I was giving at a level that in the not-too-distant past would have seemed impossible. And I felt really good about it. My giving to the church had become truly joyful.

You are a generous congregation. Your pledge to the diocese exceeds the amount asked, and on behalf of the diocese, I want to say, "Thank you." It is a remarkable thing you do, and your gifts do more than you probably realize. You should feel very good about your contribution to the life of our church.

But the most generous gift of all—the gift we celebrate today as Christ the King—comes from God. As you respond to the stewardship appeal this year and make your personal decision regarding your gifts to the church, I would ask that you consider answering God's generosity with your own. And whatever you decide, I pray that your pledge will be made lovingly, with a thankful and a joyful heart

There aren't many things in this life that we can do to thank God for the blessings we have been given, but this is one of them. When we love generously, when we give generously, the kingdom of God shines in us and we reveal Christ's majesty. When we love with our whole heart, Christ is surely king. Amen.