

# Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty  
Last Sunday in Pentecost: Christ the King – November 24, 2024

## Ultimate Truth

*2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-13; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37*



*Pomnik Chrystusa Króla (Christ the King),  
Świebodzin, Poland 2010*

**[Revelation 1:4b-8]** *Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

**[John 18:33-37]** *Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Today is a day of culmination. At St. Stephen's, we celebrate Ingathering Sunday, when we will bring the gifts of our lives and financial support to the altar. There, we will ask God's blessing upon them, that having been fed with the bread and wine of the Eucharist, this community will become Christ's hands and heart in the world.

And for the church at large, today is the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in the church year. Next week, we begin a new year with the first Sunday of Advent.

Christ the King Sunday has a unique history. Unlike other High Holy days, it does not commemorate an important event in Jesus' life or the history of the church's, like Jesus' baptism, or the Transfiguration, or Pentecost. In fact, it wasn't even a thing until 1925, when Pope Pius XI declared the last Sunday of Pentecost to be the Feast of Christ the King. The Episcopal Church adopted this observance in 1970.

The pope created this new religious holiday 100 years ago because he wanted to build spiritual ballast amid the growing secularism and nationalism in Italy and throughout the world. Remember, in the

aftermath of World War I, the Italian Fascist Party rose to power in 1922, while in Germany, Hitler and the Nazi party capitalized on economic instability, mounting an attempted coup on the Weimar Republic in 1923.

It was a time of global political upheaval, and the pope wanted to remind aggressive leaders -- especially dictators like Mussolini -- that their authority was relative, vulnerable and transitory. Their corruption, denigration of the media, and demonization of people with mixed heritage were all tactics that might amass power in the short term, but the pope wanted them to know that ultimately, in the light of more lasting truths, they would fail.

The Feast of Christ the King points to ultimate authority and ultimate truth, which belong not to temporal things but to eternal reality. In the gospel today, Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

That truth is summarized in the opening collect today: God's will is to restore all of creation, liberating people from what divides and enslaves us so that we can be free,

reconciled through God's grace. Jesus' model of authority, one based on love and life-giving service, is the absolute, lasting, and unbreakable authority. It is the light that Pope Pius sought to shine on the shady leaders of his time.

In the long span of history, the political realities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and our day are not unique. Just listen to the second reading from the Revelation to John, the last book in the Bible and the only full-blown apocalypse in the New Testament.

It was written for a 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian community persecuted under the Roman Emperor Domitian. Its prophetic imagery is meant to offer both a warning to the abusive powers that be and a promise of divine justice to the faithful. In John's vision, Christ is the one coming to bring freedom and a new kingdom. "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever."

For many of us, we hear the word "apocalypse" and think of cataclysmic events like nuclear war or an alien invasion. But the literal meaning of

apocalypse is revelation, a lifting of the veil to disclose what has been concealed. In scripture, an apocalyptic vision reveals divine mysteries of how the universe works or the destiny of the world.<sup>1</sup>

For the people who first heard the Apocalypse of John, it would have been a splash of cold water, a reset, a reminder that above and beyond the chaos of this world is God's will for justice, reconciliation, and wholeness.

For thousands of years, maybe since women and men could form the thought that goes with the feeling, we have longed for the truth that grounds us in ultimate reality, the One who is and was and is to come.

How do you experience the longing for ultimate things, for transcendent truth, today? Where are you reminded of the reality of God's presence and transformative power?

This week, I was reminded of it at the Seattle Symphony, where Will and I heard Fauré's requiem, a piece of music that for me is an apocalypse, a lifting of the veil to reveal the reality of divine life and freedom. A requiem is a funeral mass, and while other requiems (like

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<sup>1</sup> *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2212.

those composed by Verdi or Mozart) emphasize the dramatic and terrifying image of a judgment day, Fauré's Requiem offers a vision of peace and calm confidence in a benevolent, abiding, Holy One.

Our seats at Benaroya were in the first tier on the side, looking down on the audience and close enough to the stage to see the expressions on the musicians' faces. The communication between the conductor, the 120-person choir, the full orchestra, soloists and organist was breathtaking, so that the music seemed to arise from their shared gaze. As each of the seven movements unfolded, I was aware of emotions becoming unstuck and easing – sadness, worry, grief. And I felt a sense of growing freedom and grounding.

And I wasn't alone. I could see many people in the audience closing their eyes, taking a deep breath, letting their shoulders settle. Some had tears. Their thoughts and feelings, their own experiences of release, were individual and private, but there was an awareness of a shared experience, too. One of allowing beautiful sung prayers for the dead to rekindle longing in the living.

The Feast of Christ the King asks bluntly, "What is your ultimate truth?" While our ancestors may have turned to fiery symbols of divine power to illustrate their answer, we live in a time where these images have been co-opted by video games and action films. Like our ancestors, though, we long to abide in the knowledge of God's justice, reconciliation, and wholeness. We long for Christ, whom Richard Rohr identifies as the "name for the transcendent within every 'thing' in the universe."<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if a sense of this ultimate reality, of the transcendence of God, is found away from vivid multi-sensory experience -- in quiet and stillness, and open-hearted listening. That is the invitation of Advent, which begins next Sunday.

But that is next week. Today, we celebrate Ingathering Sunday and look forward to a new year of ministry together, proclaiming Christ as our savior and ballast, and sharing the riches of our earthly blessings.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*.