

CHRIST THE WHAT

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

The Gospel of Matthew is a book written primarily for Jewish readers and is intended to make the case to Jews that Jesus is the Messiah whom God had promised. Matthew presents Jesus as a great teacher but also as a king in keeping with the Old Testament theme that the Messiah would be a king. Matthew's Gospel refers often to the "kingdom" of heaven which is to be ushered in by the coming of Messiah Jesus. In contrast to this, if we were reading about Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, we would see Jesus presented not as a king but as a servant. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as Savior who liberates from all forms of oppression, spiritual and material. The Gospel of John is interested in the nature of Jesus and how he can be God's Word in human form. Different Gospels, different pictures of Jesus. But our Gospel is from Matthew and so we have Jesus depicted as a king, which would seem to be appropriate enough on Christ the King Sunday.

Appropriate but I think unfortunate, and especially insofar as the last Sunday of the Church Year is *always* Christ the King Sunday. Why can't we end the year with "Christ the Servant Sunday," or "Christ the Liberator Sunday," or even "Christ the Wisdom Sunday?" Wouldn't it be refreshing to have various images of Jesus with which to culminate the Christian Year? But it's always "Christ the King."

In a conversation with Ann Novak a couple of weeks ago, we found that we both saw strong similarities between the present scandal at Penn State and the scandal in the

Roman Catholic Church of priests molesting children. This similarity has since been noted by many commentators but not at the time of our conversation. The similarity, we agreed, was more than that of grown men preying on young boys. What more? Ann put it succinctly: in both cultures, the Roman Catholic Church and Penn State's football program, there are no women. These are not just male-dominated cultures. They are exclusively male cultures, where women are absent and men protect their own as it would be difficult to imagine women doing. A woman witnessing the horror of a young boy being raped by a coach in the locker room (to which, of course, she would not be admitted) would have acted to put a stop to the crime, not simply passed it up the line from man to man to be handled or not handled. Recalling the Bible story, Sarah would never be persuaded by God to take her son Isaac out to be slaughtered as a sacrifice. That's between Abraham and the very male image of God that is represented in that story.

Anyway, the king of Penn State was Joe Paterno, the venerated football coach who made Penn State the football powerhouse it is and in so doing turned a small-time state school into an important research university. In 2009, Penn State football generated \$50 million in profit for the university, such profits being the real core value of college football—at Rutgers as well as at Penn State, it may be said. Paterno the king's program was generally better than most and by all accounts Joe Paterno is a good man, which makes it all the more difficult to understand how he could have turned a blind eye to his former assistant coach's crimes after mentioning these to *his* superior, thereby allowing the man to continue to have access to Penn State's football facilities and run his youth camps on Penn State property.

Addressing this, Joe Nocera has written in *The New York Times* (11/12/11), “Big-time college football requires grown men to avert their eyes from the essential hypocrisy of the enterprise. Coaches take their multimillion dollar salaries, while their players who make them rich don’t even get ‘scholarships’ that cover the cost of attending college. They push their ‘student-athletes’ to take silly courses that won’t get in the way of football... ‘College football and men’s basketball have drifted so far away from the educational purpose of the university,’ [says] James Duderstadt, a former president of the university of Michigan... ‘They place the athlete’s health at enormous risk which becomes apparent in later life. We are supposed to be developing human potential, not making money on their backs. Football strikes at the core values of a university.’”

“What goes on in the typical big-time college football program constitutes abuse of the athletes who play the game.... When Paterno averted his eyes from Jerry Sandusky, he was just doing what came naturally as a college football coach.”

That conclusion may be too harsh, but I don’t know that it is wrong in its essentials. Moreover, it’s something that concerns me not only as a graduate of Rutgers and a taxpayer in New Jersey, where officials and many fans would like nothing more than to have a football program like Penn State’s, but also as a Christian charged with speaking to my congregation on a Christ the King Sunday when we are told that God feeds us with justice.

The parable of “the judgment of the nations” that Jesus tells goes to the heart of the Christian faith and who our God is. We assume with the traditions of Christianity that Jesus is the “Son of Man” in the parable, though Jesus doesn’t say so himself. But it makes good sense in the context of this parable to assume this. After all, Jesus does

identify with the lowly and the maligned. Jesus is the boy raped in the locker room, even as he is the hungry and the thirsty and the sick and the stranger and all who are vulnerable and needy and forsaken, and the judgment is that we do to him what we do to them. If you understand this parable, you understand the most fundamental of Christian teachings, and it is plain that Jesus is no more a king than he is a celebrated coach with a multimillion dollar contract. He is the least, he is not the most.

In the history of our faith, the image of Christ the King served well the interests of those who wanted a church that was a kind of monarchy headed by men who were like kings with royal courts of cardinals and bishops and priests—all men. The image of king has also led to the distancing of Jesus from the people he most identified with as he was elevated to a throne at the right hand of God like the son of a monarch in a royal court. We can understand the image's appeal in portraying God's sovereignty in all things, but it's danger is in overshadowing the other images of Christ as servant and liberator and wisdom of God, images that are essential for thinking about what kind of sovereignty belongs to God.

As we know, our language is always inadequate when we make reference to God. We use language that is at our disposal and the images that matter to us to describe and call upon the One who is Creator of the heavens and the earth and beyond all human description. It is important to realize that such images are limited, that they are useful up to a point or for a time, but not always and forever—few of us these days are acquainted with or in any way attracted to kings and monarchies as means for governing our lives, and indeed we resent it if our leaders behave as if they were royalty. And as Christians we know it is never a good thing for us to act high and mighty or allow ourselves to be

put in position where we are treated as high and mighty. Our faith teaches us the values of service to all and liberation from the forces of oppression and the love of wisdom as images to guide our lives, values embodied in the person of Jesus and images worthy of recollection as we come to the end of the Church Year. And perhaps one other image as well, an image that is a little more stretched and even for some a bit jarring, and yet an image that seems appropriate: Christ the Woman. It is an image to restore what can easily be forgotten in a world where kings have ruled and men have for so long been sovereign. Amen.

Christ the King Sunday, November 20, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church