

November 22, 2009
Last Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Canon Catherine Nichols

“His crown is thorns, his throne the cross, his kingdom the hearts of all people.”
What a simple, yet profound description of Jesus. I found it, quoted from an anonymous source, and on Christ the King Sunday, it expresses all that is needed. “His crown is thorns, his throne the cross, his kingdom the hearts of all people.”

In his commentary on the Book of Common Prayer, Marion Hatchett - one of the Episcopal Church's most distinguished scholars of liturgy - tells us that Christ, the King, is a recent invention. No wonder I didn't remember it from my childhood...Christ the King Sunday?...we didn't have it then. We didn't make crowns in Sunday school on this last Sunday of Pentecost. Sometime, during the 1920's, the Roman Catholic Church began to use readings and psalms about kingship, on the last Sunday in October...and called it at that time, Christ the King Sunday. Interestingly enough, that particular day for Christ the King - the last Sunday of October - was the very same day the Lutherans celebrated Reformation Sunday. (laughter) The Roman Catholics' response to their Lutheran brothers' and sisters' honoring of Martin Luther:...“We'll honor Jesus, the king of all.”

During the sweeping liturgical movements of Vatican II, the Roman Catholics changed Christ the King Sunday to the last Sunday before Advent...the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday is our New Year's Day in our liturgical calendar. And we too, have picked up the celebration. I love the contradiction: we celebrate Christ as King today, and next Sunday--the first Sunday of Advent--we'll begin to wait for Jesus' humble birth, in a rude stable. So today...Christ the King is the theme, and thus our readings about God as King, and Pilates' fear of Jesus' supposed claim to be King. We hear “kingly” words so often in church. Are they ever disturbing to those of us committed to democracy? I don't think so...we're so used to the metaphor. Our psalm, “The Lord is King,” and our response, “The Lord shall reign forever and ever,” Kings and queens reign. Today's reading from Hebrew Scripture, is a vision of Daniel. The vision is quite glorious...the Ancient One on a throne of fiery flames, with wheels of burning fire, served by thousands, and attended by ten thousand times ten thousand! It's the stuff of a Cecil B. DeMille movie! And this Ancient One grants dominion, glory, and kingship, upon the human presented to him. His kingship is one that shall never be destroyed, we are told. We automatically see Christ as that figure, upon whom God--the Ancient One--confers kingship.

And then in today's reading, from the Revelation of John, Jesus is called “the ruler of the Kings of the earth.” And today's Gospel reading: Pilate asks that question...“Are you the King of the Jews?” Because we hear all four gospels read in church, we hear various allusions to Jesus' royal status. The Gospel of Luke in the first chapter, tells of the angel Gabriel, announcing to Mary, that she'll bear a child, and that the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor, David. In Matthew's Gospel, the infant Jesus is honored by the Wise Ones, who traveled far from Eastern lands...who come with the burning question: Where is the child who is born the King of the Jews? In John...when

Jesus has fed the five thousand, after the disciples have gathered together the leftover bread...the crowd becomes restive. John's narrative continues..."when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him King...he withdrew again to the mountain, by himself." The people sought a leader who would do what they wanted...who would solve their problems...who would change their lives.

And indeed, Jesus could, would, change lives. But he was not the sort of King they sought...one who would do what they wanted...who would allow them to be passive followers. Rather, Jesus would challenge people to seek the kingdom where little is a lot...where the poor are blessed...where love is a verb demanding justice and peace. Jesus taught love, and as a result - his crown was to be thorns. His throne the cross, his kingdom the hearts of all people. Christ is the King of paradox...a king who serves...a king who serves all...not merely those who hang out around him, in his court. A king, whose kingdom cannot be defined by worldly boundaries. A king of lowly birth, who dies the death of a criminal. His crown is thorns. Jesus...the paradoxical servant King.

This past Friday--as most of you know--we elected, at our Convention in Eugene, the tenth bishop of Oregon. (applause) The Reverend Michael Joseph Hanley, rector of St. Christopher's Church in Roseville, Minnesota--a suburb of St. Paul. It was an amazing election. Bishop-elect Hanley won on the second ballot. That's unusual. Episcopal Canon Law demands that for a bishop to be elected, the winning nominee must receive over half of the votes, of both the lay delegates, and the clergy. Each congregation elects its own delegates to represent the congregation. So, it is indeed a democratic process. There were 198 delegates on the floor of the Hilton ballroom. Thus, the winner had to have 100 votes, or more. And on the first ballot, Michael Hanley won 99 delegate votes. Only one less than needed. There were 132 clergy voting. Only 67 votes were needed to win in the clergy order. On the first ballot, the Rev. Hanley won 69 votes. So on that first ballot, he had already won among the clergy. After that, we took about 15 minutes of "grace" time. Folks prayed, some talked softly about their reasons for voting, and at the end of that time, we chanted the Taize song: "Come, Holy Spirit." And the second ballots were marked. The tally showed that Bishop-elect Hanley won 146 votes, in the laity where he needed 100...104 among the clergy where he needed 67. Winning on the second ballot - that's a swift election. And winning by such a margin - that's a mandate. We were stunned and joyful...at least most of us. Our next bishop has been elected with no doubt that many of us want him as our tenth bishop.

So why am I talking about our election, amidst my thoughts of Christ the King? Well, indeed, it's big news for us. But also...the parallel is profound. We've not elected this man to solve our problems. We've not elected this man to do what WE want. We have elected this bishop to lead us. To lead us the way Jesus the Christ leads us...to listen, to love, to heal, and to teach about the paradoxical Kingdom of God...where the first are last, and the last are first. Bishops' ministries are servant ministries. Bishop-elect Hanley will be consecrated our bishop on April 10th, in Eugene, at a large, dignified, glorious liturgy. We Episcopalians love liturgy--pomp will be in evidence. Indeed, our liturgy has some of its roots in coronation services. And then the next day--April 11th--Bishop Hanley will be seated in his cathedral, on his throne...the seat of the bishop. We're a cathe-

dral, because the Latin word “cathedra” means “chair.” The seat of the bishop of the diocese is always at the cathedral. We’ll be excited, thankful, joyous, that our tenth bishop will be among us, and that the diocese can move ahead under his guidance.

Most of you know that the word “bishop” comes from the Greek word, “episcopos,” which means “overseer.” “Epi” = “over,” “scopos,” = “to look.” An overseer...one who looks over. An overseer can seek power, but from our informal conversations with the three nominees, at clergy conference...my sense of the Reverend Michael Joseph Hanley is that...he’s not interested in power. My sense is that he is committed to serving. My heartfelt hope is that, as Bishop, Michael Hanley will serve us--the people of Oregon, as a pastoral, intelligent, experienced overseer. As you all know from experience, our new bishop will wear a mitre. Curious...as to where the rather odd-looking hats our bishops wear, originated. I looked up the derivation of “mitre” in my unabridged dictionary...where I had just been looking up “Episcopal.” (laughter) What would we do without unabridged dictionaries? Did you know that the word “mitre” simply means “head-covering?” A certain style of headcovering, to be sure. The mitre comes from the headcovering of the Jewish high priests of long ago. In fact, the picture in the dictionary showed those early mitres to be more “turban-like.” But is it not ironic, that our bishops wear headcoverings...the predecessors for which, were worn by the very clergy--the Jewish high priests--who were threatened by Jesus, as King of the Jews.

My hope for our new bishop, is that his crown will not be of thorns, but in a profound way, his throne will indeed be the cross. And Bishop-elect Hanley already knows, that his kingdom will soon be the hearts of the people of the Diocese of Oregon. For at the very core of the Reverend Michael Hanley, Bishop-elect of Oregon, are both his worship of, and utter commitment to...Christ the King...the God/Man...whose crown is thorns...whose throne the cross...and whose kingdom, the hearts of all people. Amen.