

The Last Sunday after Pentecost, the Feast of Christ the King
21 November 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

We have reached the end of the seemingly endless Sundays after Pentecost. We stand on the brink of a new Church Year. Before we plunge into our few weeks of quiet, intentional preparation for the coming of Christ into our lives, we stop and celebrate, celebrate the ultimate, triumphant lordship of Christ over all things. The Feast of Christ the King. King of kings and Lord of lords. Much fabulous music and poetry has been written inspired by this theme, and it stirs our hearts and souls. I can scarcely hear 'King of kings and Lord of lords' without the music of Handel echoing gloriously in my ears.

This time of year is filled with saints' days on which we remember heroes of faith. As I thought about the Feast of Christ the King, some of these heroes stood vividly before me as examples of what it means to live with Christ as King and Lord. I have chosen three for our consideration this morning: From the 11th century, Queen Margaret of Scotland; from the 13th century, Landgravine Elizabeth of Thuringia; from the 19th and 20th centuries, James Otis Sargent Huntington. priest and founder of the Order of the Holy Cross.

Two of these were queens in their own right and one an American patrician, but all of them listened first to the calling of Christ, laying aside the advice and traditional roles of their own families. All three took very seriously that image of Christ on his most glorious throne saying to the people, "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me."

These all fed the hungry, in body and spirit; gave drink to the thirsty; welcomed the stranger; clothed the naked; visited the sick and imprisoned, regardless of whether this seemed unreasonable to their peers. Christ was their King and his dominion was the only structure of the authority which truly mattered to them.

When Margaret fled for her life from England to Scotland, she was probably not expecting to rule there. But King Malcolm married her and made her his queen. She settled into the secluded and privileged life of a queen and bore her first child. But then she wanted to see the country and people who had been entrusted to their care. Malcolm may have thought it strange but he took her out. She saw suffering and deprivation, hungry people and collapsing churches, with priests and monks struggling to care for the people in buildings without windows or proper roofs. She contrasted scrawny crying babies, with her own blooming healthy son, and told her husband that they must do something about such an unsatisfactory situation. She fed the hungry and tended the sick herself. She took wool from the royal sheep and wove it with her own hands to give warmth to those shivering around her. She saw to the proper rebuilding of the Churches and the funding of their work.

Margaret lived on for decades, bearing a great many more children, but always caring for those in need. Malcolm found his life as King quite different from what it had been before, but he was not discontent. He may have thought that he understood her work among the poor and suffering, but he was puzzled by his wife's frequent disappearances into the forest alone. He chose to follow her and see what she might be hiding from him.

There is a carving over the doors into Saint Margaret's Chapel at the school where I was many years a chaplain, showing Malcolm crouching in the bushes, while Margaret kneels on the ground absorbed in prayer. Margaret's very public life of charity grew out of her private life of prayer and devotion to her own true King, Jesus the Christ. Prayer was the heart of her life and her relationship to Christ, and submission to his command of love determined all that she did.

Less than two centuries later, in continental Europe, we find another queen determined to keep Jesus as her own king. Given her own choice, Elizabeth probably would have stayed at home in Hungary and become a sister in the Poor Clares, inspired as she was by the teaching and example of Saint Francis. But politics ruled the choices of royal children and she was early sent to the court of Thuringia, chosen to be the bride of the Landgrave. She married and bore him three children. As far as we can tell, they were happy together and her husband did not resist Elizabeth's work among the poor. But he was similarly bound by a sense of religious duty and went off to fight in a crusade which soon claimed his life. Elizabeth's husband was alone among the royal family in supporting her charities.

After her husband's death, those who remained had no tolerance for Elizabeth's personal nursing of sick paupers or feeding of beggars. They finally threw her out on the pretext that her charitable works would bankrupt the royal house. She was forced to leave her young children in the care of her husband's family and take refuge with her spiritual director, a man of fierce and uncompromising discipline. In her desire to follow Christ utterly, Elizabeth submitted to whatever this man demanded, including severe physical "chastening".

What mattered to her was that she could devote herself directly to feeding and nursing those in need. By the age of 24, Elizabeth died, spending her whole self in service of Christ and his people.

James Otis Sargent Huntington was the son of a Bishop, product of excellent schooling, which culminated at Harvard. His Congregationalist and Unitarian forbears would have been startled enough to find an Episcopal Bishop in the family, let alone a young priest who found himself called to begin a monastic order in service to the poor and needy and spiritually hungry of New York City. For 50 years he gave himself to the love and service of God and his fellow human beings.

Out of his mission, which sometimes left him in great loneliness and discouragement, have arisen monasteries and schools across our continent and in Liberia. In his centennial history of the Order of the Holy Cross, my seminary classmate, Brother Adam McCoy, writes, “Who can tell what the energies of holiness can do? This is the power God has unleashed in the world through James Otis Sargent Huntington and the Order of the Holy Cross. A hundred years of faithfulness, prayer, service. . . . A hundred years of waiting, waiting for the Word out of Silence. And when the Word speaks, it is of love, of life, and of the future: ‘Holiness is the brightness of divine love, and love is never idle; it must accomplish great things. Love must act, as light must shine and fire must burn.’ “

These three saintly people stand as examples to all of us who come after, in our efforts to live out our own relationships with Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. In Jeremiah this morning, we heard the Lord speaking of searching out his own sheep, promising to feed them and care for them, binding up wounds, giving strength and protection to all. We take great comfort in this promise of divine love and aid. Much of the courage and confidence of the great servants of humanity comes from their knowledge that God himself will look after them. As Margaret faced incomprehension, and Elizabeth faced exhaustion and death, and as Father Huntington faced loneliness and discouragement, none of them felt entirely alone or hopeless, because all looked up to the face of Christ on the throne and saw in him the King who ruled them and the Shepherd who would care for them to the end.

What of us? Few of us are as prominent as any of these or endowed with so much power and wealth, but we all have lives and loyalties. Looking at their lives gives us a sense of the unexpected calls from God, always to serve God by serving others, but often in quite unanticipated places or ways. We see that those around us may not understand or support what we feel called to do and that we will not know what kind of success our efforts may yield, but that our King will always be with us to guard us and to guide us, requiring only that we are faithful in our devotion to him and the path he sets before us. To accept Jesus as King, means to accept Love as the end and meaning of life, as the central focus of all that we think or do. And “Love is never idle; it must accomplish great things. Love must act, as light must shine and fire must burn.” And so we act out the love of Christ in the world, as faithful subjects of the King of Love.

If you wish to explore different reflections on divine kinship, pick up one of the sheets of poetry with reflections from many times and places through the history of the Church. Amen.