

SERMON
November 26, 2006
Proper 29: Christ the King Sunday
“The Sword and the Stone”

You may be familiar with the book “The Sword and the Stone”,
Part of the series “The Once and Future King” by E.B. White.
It’s a children’s book, written in 1939,
that tells the tale of King Arthur.

The story is set in old England many, many years ago,
in the days after the Norman conquest.
The protagonist in the story is a boy named Wart.
He’s named Wart because that rhymes (at least in those days) with Art,
which is short for Arthur.

Wart is the son of the King Uther Pendragon,
but his birth is unknown to the kingdom.
Soon after he’s born,
Merlyn the magician spirits him away from his mother
and takes him to a rather disheveled castle in a distant part of the kingdom
where he is brought up as the adopted son of Sir Ector,
the Lord of the castle.

Wart grows up like any lad does among ordinary people.
He plays in the woods, gets scolded by his nurse,
and learns how to take care of falcons.
But when Wart is about 12,
he discovers Merlyn the magician in the forest
Merlyn becomes his tutor.

Merlyn is a rambling, somewhat confused magician
because he’s living backwards in time.

He was born in the future and
he's continually growing younger as the story goes on.
So he often forgets whether something is in his future or in his past.

Merlyn's job is to teach Wart all things he needs to know.

Because he's a magician,
Merlyn has the power to change Wart into anything he chooses.
So as part of his training Wart becomes a hawk,
then a fish, an ant, an owl, and a goose.

So not only does the true son of King Uther Pendragon
get to see what it was like to be raised as a normal boy –
he also gets to see things from the perspective of a swimming fish,
and a soaring hawk, and a laboring ant.

When Wart is grown to about 18 years old,
he goes with his adopted father Sir Ector to the great fair in London.
This fair has been called because Uther Pendragon has died
and the kingdom must choose a new king.
No one knows that Wart is the true son of the King.

Now in London there is a sword that is enclosed in a stone.
The legend is that if anyone can pull the sword from the stone,
they will become king.

Naturally every knight at the fair tries to pull the sword from the stone,
but the sword is immovable.

Wart, however, steps up to the stone and calls upon the power of Merlyn.
When he does, the sword slips effortlessly out of the stone and
Wart is crowned the true king of England.

Well, you can see the analogy to Jesus.

Jesus, like Wart, was born in obscurity and was raised as a normal boy.

He played in his mother's house,

he learned carpentry and farming from his adopted father, Joseph.

He grew up among poor people

and he got to know what life was like for them.

Just as Wart was taught by Merlyn,

Jesus was taught by the Holy Spirit.

Luke says, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,
and the favor of God was upon him."

In the Sword and the Stone, Wart finds out that he is the true son of Uther Pendragon
when he pulls the sword from the stone.

And in the Gospel story, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God
when he rolls the stone aside from the tomb
and ascends into heaven to sit at God's right hand.

The point is that all along Jesus was a true king
but human beings didn't know it until the resurrection.

The Gospel story this morning tells us
how Pilate didn't understand that Jesus was a true king either.

When Jesus was brought before Pilate as a prisoner, Pilate asked him,
"Are you the King of the Jews?"

And Jesus answered him, "My kingdom is not of this world."

The irony of the story is that Jesus is a true king,
and Pilate is only a petty tyrant, but Pilate can't see it.

The New Testament affirms that after the resurrection,
Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God
where he reigns forever.

The witness of the New Testament and the witness of the Church is
that Jesus was not just a human teacher or a human prophet,
or even a human being who rose from the dead.

Our witness is that Jesus is a living presence
and living authority for us and for the world.

What this means is that we believe the authorities of this world
are not the ultimate authorities.

We who are followers of Jesus have our allegiance to
another authority who is high above all rulers – Jesus.

As followers of Jesus we hold ourselves and the world to a higher standard,
and that standard is the self-giving love of Jesus.

We remember the poor and humble of the world
because Jesus grew up among the poor and humble.

We call the powers of the world to account
because that's what Jesus did also.

We are the conscience of the world
because we belong to kingdom that is not of this world.

[When we say that Christ is the King of the universe,
we don't mean that we somehow have the right to assume that
we have the power of God to use as we see fit.

The church has done that over the centuries,
and the result is almost always disaster.]

People say we shouldn't use the word "King" anymore.

They say it's too patriarchal, too outdated – it's so medieval,
and there's no modern equivalent.

But every kid knows what a king is,
and every kid knows what a kingdom is.

A kingdom is a mythical place, a place in our imaginations,
where we know the king is good and just,
and the people live in peace and tranquility.

So as we conclude another year in the church calendar,
we remember Jesus as our King and our Lord.