For the Journey

Nov. 19, 26 - Rev. Dave Crawford



("Christ the King", Irene Thomas, 2020)

There are multiple layers to this painting by Irene Thomas (acrylic on canvas); I encourage you to explore them. Enlarging the artwork or zooming in will reveal those layers. There are also multiple layers to Christ the King Sunday (Nov. 22nd), and to Christ Jesus himself.

Sometime in late November, about twenty-five years ago, during a rehearsal break in the joyously decorated sanctuary of Rundle United Church, a fellow chorister from the bass section asked about the piece we'd just been working on, from Handel's Messiah, "And with His Stripes we are Healed". *"What does it mean, Dave, the stripes? What is that?*" I had no choice but to break the news to him, and a few others listening in, right there in the middle of the festively adorned worship space, just steps away from the shimmering Christmas tree, that the stripes were Jesus' scars from being whipped and flogged prior to his crucifixion. The little group, up to that point in the evening enjoying the Christmasy, festive mood and some choral camaraderie, suddenly dispersed rather quietly and quickly.

At this time of year numerous choirs across our nation are preparing diligently for performances in a early or mid-December of George Friedrich Handel's "Messiah". They've been rehearsing for weeks or even a couple of months already. The music is difficult, rehearsals exhausting yet exhilarating. Learning the music of Messiah, or simply listening to it, is a journey into the multiple layers of Christian faith, how they overlap and intertwine. For example, the vocally challenging and quick-paced lines of "For Unto us a Child is Born" are followed a bit later by the deeply moving and much slower "Behold the Lamb of God, Who Takes Away the Sins of the World". This musical move from Incarnation narratives to Passion accounts of the Scriptures is natural, necessary, but culturally we've come to expect performances of "Messiah" to occur only at Christmastime, which is only part of the Christ story. The conclusion of Handel's masterpiece, just prior to the lengthy and glorious "Amen", is based on Revelation 5: "Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain". Christmas and Good Friday and Easter too (the Hallelujah chorus) come together in Handel's creation. The contrast is clear, the prophetic predictions and Gospel accounts of a Messiah's birth giving way to other biblical proclamations of that same Messiah's crucifixion were well understood and expressed by Handel, as was the promise of the resurrection. Perhaps that's why performances of Messiah in the weeks leading up to Christmas don't just include the Christmas-oriented choruses, duets and solos. Easter is the starting point of Christian faith, pointing us back to mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

Christ the King Sunday brings us to the end of the church calendar year. Yet, in the words of T.S. Eliot ("East Coker"), which Natalie Sleeth later used in a verse from her hymn, "In the Bulb there is a flower", *"In our end is our beginning."* Advent follows Christ the King Sunday, inaugurating a new church year ecumenically.

It speaks of arrival, the advent of a new age, a new way of God reaching out to humanity in order to raise it, redeem it. Before Advent, however, we're invited to contemplate just who this Jesus was, who he is still.

The words of a lesser known hymn (which we'll sing this Sunday) capture well the contrast of the Rabbi, Messiah, and Son of God we celebrate, follow, and worship:

"You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer
of the way you took and gave.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, whom we both scorn and crave.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and victory.
Worthy still your peace and strife.
You, the everlasting instant;
you, who are our death and life."
("Christus Paradox"; music: Sylvia Dunstan; words: John Van Maanen, 1984.)

"King of Kings and Lord of Lords!
And He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah!…"
(Handel: Messiah - "Hallelujah Chorus")

Grace and Peace,
Rev. Dave