



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the Last Sunday of Pentecost (Christ the King) (Proper 29)

St. Mark's on the Campus

November 23, 2006

**N**O DOUBT SOME OF YOU HAVE SEEN THE TWO FILMS based on the *Princess Diary* books. For those of you who have not, let me bring you up to speed, especially on the second of the two films.

It's basically a romantic comedy—and I admit that I'm a sucker for romantic comedies so I really enjoyed it! However, there's a theme underneath the romance, and that's what I want to focus on this morning because it ties in with our celebration of Christ the King Sunday.

In *The Princess Diaries 2*, there's a power struggle going on. It's a struggle between two heirs to the throne of Genovia, a mythic country somewhere in Europe. One heir is Mia, the princess for whom the series is named. The other heir is a distant relative, Nicholas. You can probably guess what happens with the two of them by the end of the film.

Along the way, Nicholas—whose parents are long dead—is pushed into pursuing the throne by his uncle. In a revealing scene about motivation, Nicholas and his uncle have a discussion about the person for whom Nicholas is named. Nicholas himself insists that it is his Grandfather.

The uncle, on the other hand, insists that his nephew is named for Nikolai Machiavelli. Of course we can't hear the name "Machiavelli" without all the connotations of ruthless power that have accrued around him rising immediately to the fore—and these associations become attached to the uncle, who indeed is ruthless and conniving and deceitful in his efforts to get Nicholas on the throne—and he wants his nephew to be just like him.

Nicholas, though, is primarily interested in the welfare of the people of Genovia. And throughout the film, we see Nicholas gradually move toward a place of understanding about

who would best rule the country for the welfare of its citizens. And although Nicholas is never as evil as his uncle, we do see him transform from someone very much under his uncle's influence to someone who is willing to relinquish his quest for control of the throne. In the end, he is clearly motivated not by the lust of power that his uncle has, but by his passion for the people he cares for and what is best for *their* common good. Hints run throughout the movie that this attitude has always been paramount in Nicholas' heart, but it's only through the journey Nicholas makes during the film that he becomes willing to sacrifice his own self-interest—as narrowly defined by his uncle—for the greater good.

OK, I admit that I've now given away part of the ending. It's still a fun movie.

So what does this film have to do with our celebration of *Christ the King* this morning? It's the way that the characters in the movie deal with monarchy and power. It's very clear that what is prioritized in the film is power for the purpose of service, not power for the purpose of glorifying one's self. Does that sound like anything in the Christian tradition?

We Anglicans like to say that our “praying shapes our believing.” If you look at the prayers set aside for each Sunday—the “collects of the day”—many, if not most, of them (I didn't do a scientific study; my observation is based on years of praying them)—most of them begin with words such as, “Almighty God.” So if our prayers shape our believing, we suggest fairly strongly to ourselves and to God that we believe God is “*All Mighty*,” omnipotent. Very clearly, though, based on the centrality of the cross in the Christian tradition, God's omnipotence, God's might, has been self-limited; God chooses to share power. Or another way to put it is that God defines power far differently than the world defines power.

As revealed in Jesus, the way God uses power is not as Machiavelli might use power, at least as portrayed in the film I mentioned—and I recognize that the tradition that has accrued around Machiavelli might differ from his writings, not to mention from the person himself.

Somewhat like the tradition that has accrued around our Lord Jesus.

Some of you no doubt have a better idea about Machiavelli than I do, but I do know that some of the traditions around Jesus are far removed from his willingness to die on the cross as a

witness to his ultimate trust in God, and as a witness to the place of trust to which God calls us.

Many of you know the Christus Rex, or “Christ the King,” the cross that has Jesus on it, but not Jesus in suffering; rather, Jesus reigning in glory, with a crown on his head and dressed in Eucharistic vestments.

The image of the Christus Rex is perhaps the clearest portrayal of Christ reigning from the cross, not simply dying upon it. While it doesn’t capture the suffering of Jesus in the same way that a dying Christ does, it does capture that Christ reigns *even* from the cross—and perhaps *most clearly* from the cross—including in the midst of suffering. The Christus Rex expresses the reign of God with shocking and absolute clarity; power expressed as the ultimate service to others; death to bring life. In one way, it’s the greatest contradiction. *And* it’s the ultimate truth of God: Strength made manifest in weakness. And because Jesus also reveals what it is to be human, the power we have as human beings shines clearly at the cross as well: the power to ourselves be weak so that others will be stronger.

How different the world is when we embrace that truth; it leads individuals and communities of faith to do marvelous things, remarkable things, even things they themselves might consider miraculous. It leads Moses to defy the power and authority of pharaoh, knowing that the consequences could be deadly. Not unlike Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who walked with him.

And it leads the people of Israel to journey forward in faith, out of Egypt through threatening waters and into the wilderness, trusting in the Lord their God—imperfectly trusting to be sure, but trusting, I suspect, at least as definitively as most of us do. When we embrace the truth of the cross from which Jesus reigns, we choose to trust—imperfectly, to be sure, but the very best that we can.

We gather this morning to celebrate *God's* power, *God's* reign and *God's* way of using all the power that rightly belongs to God: and to use it—to reign—by serving. By serving *us*. **God** chooses to serve **us**!

It often mystifies us and confuses us and on some level even *troubles* us because we are so deeply shaped by images of power which have little if anything to do with God's power for others rather than power *over* others.

And it troubles us because at those moments when the truth to which Jesus comes to testify breaks through to us, we know how inverted this world can sometimes be, in that God must serve us because we human beings are not choosing to serve God. At those moments we are once again driven to our knees—in gratitude and in repentance and in resolve, resolve to serve, and to use the power which God has shared with us for the benefit those whom we are called to serve.

Ultimately, we choose to celebrate God's reign this day and each Sunday because we finally trust in one who exercises power at the cross on behalf of us and the entire creation—because we believe that we **all** are the “other” for whom Christ reigns from the cross, we ourselves, with all our limitations and all our foibles; our hard hearts and our blindness; our unfaithfulness and our sin. Because we know that by walking with Jesus in *God's* reign, we ourselves become more grace-filled; we become images of the cross that we wear on our foreheads as the baptized people of Christ, the one for whom **we** are named.

Not because any of us have somehow earned that privilege, but simply because that's who God is and *that* is how **God** uses power:

To heal; to reconcile; to forgive.

To draw us back.

To love us all until love reigns perfectly through us all.

“Thanks and glory be to God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.”