



Christ the King

Revelation 1:4b-8 & John 18:33-37
Christ the King - November 24, 2024
Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and noted theologian, once started a sermon on Christ the King Sunday with the following:

When do you take down your Christmas decorations? We could probably find out a lot about each other if we asked that question and listened for the nuances in the replies. In my family, we were liturgically correct to a fare-thee-well. My mother did not believe in putting up the tree until Christmas Eve and we took it down on Twelfth Night. My favorite story about this concerns an Episcopal priest friend of ours, Jeffrey. He had a friend, also a priest, who used to scold his parishioners if they put up their trees too early in Advent. Jeffrey decided that instead of taking this negative approach he would accentuate the positive by encouraging his own flock to leave their decorations up until Epiphany. One day, on Christmas afternoon at twilight, after his family had opened all their presents and were taking naps, he took the dog out for a walk. What was his dismay to discover his neighbor's Christmas tree out in the gutter. Jeffrey couldn't help himself; he went up to the house, knocked on the door, and when his neighbor opened it, he said, 'Bob! What is your tree doing out on the curb on Christmas Day? You should know better; you're a Catholic!' To which Bob responded sheepishly, "Yeah, I know, but my wife's a Presbyterian."

I relay that little story because it says something big about all of us. Just as Bob's Presbyterian wife compartmentalized her Christmas celebration so too are we tempted to compartmentalize our theology about today's celebration; we are tempted at times to think of Christ being King only on this particular Sunday and are forgetful of its implications on some waning Tuesday afternoon. If Jesus Christ is King then he reigns over all our lives and all creation and not just at our discretion.

Christ's lordship cannot be manipulated or pigeonholed, that is it cannot be just acknowledged when it best suits us and then discarded or ignored when we feel that it doesn't fit into our rubric for life. We can't look to Christ as our King when we're in some crisis or moment of need and neglect this when we feel quite capable and fully satisfied with life. You get the feeling that Christmas for Bob's Presbyterian wife was over when that tree hit the curb and the discarded wrapping paper collected in the bin ... and though that might be true for the celebration of a season, it is not true for what we contemplate this morning.

Just what does it mean for us to proclaim Christ as King on this late-November morning? What does it mean for us to claim that Jesus Christ, the one who met Pontius Pilate, stood accused and was executed, is King and Lord of all creation? What does that mean?

Mary Anderson, in an article about this text, says the following:

To say Christ is king implies that we are subjects. The heart of this relationship is our dependence on a ruler who holds our lives in his hands. We do not choose a ruler as we elect a president, hire a CEO or contract with a therapist. We are Christ's people – we share the same Eucharistic foods, we share the same story of faith, we stake our lives on the same hopes.

Our proclamation that Christ is King does not make it so, just as any possible rejection of it negate that fact. Our affirmation that Christ is King does nothing to the reality of Jesus Christ and his lordship, rather this proclamation does something to us. It is our confession that we are subjects of Christ's lordship ... that we belong to him and him alone. That should change us! It places this relationship above and beyond all other relationships that we might have, develop, or discover in our living. This is our prime relationship: Christ is Lord and we as his subjects.

There is a desire among some churches and denominations, including our own, to change the nomenclature for this day from “Christ the King” to “The Reign of Christ.” Such a change is proposed probably because kings and kingdoms do not translate well within the American culture of choice and freedom. Or maybe the alteration is posited because the word King smacks too much of male hierarchies. Or maybe it is considered because kingdom projects a forced reality or violent suppression of opposition. Whatever the rationale, calling this Sunday ‘the Reign of Christ’ just doesn’t work, at least to me. Christ the King implies a relationship that puts all of the other priorities of life in the right order. It places all the focus on the right place – or rather – the right person.

Mary Anderson, in that same article I cited earlier, writes:

To speak of kings and kingdoms, of subjects and peoples, requires a fair amount of translation for modern ears. Some, finding the translation too cumbersome, will opt for calling Jesus their CEO or therapist. But what will then be truly lost is not the title used, but the relationship implied.

Our celebration this day of Christ the King proclaims that Jesus is not our CEO, not our therapist, not our elected leader, not even our savior by our decision alone. Jesus Christ is King, Lord and Savior not by our initiative or election, but by the will of God himself. It is God who has made Christ the King, not us, and certainly not Pilate or the civil and political authorities that he represents. The disciples, no matter how much they tried to spread the gospel and grow the church, did not make Christ the King. Christ as Lord, and Christ as King is not our doing, it is the work of God in our lives, in the life of our world, in the life of all God’s creation.

Here’s another aspect of this day and why it is vitally important to remember that Jesus Christ is King and not other pretenders to the throne. The following comes from the great Methodist theologian, William Willimon:

Now Jesus came to take on the principalities and powers. He lived and taught a way of being human, which challenged the powers. The powers said: ‘Live and die for the almighty dollar!’ Jesus said you can’t serve God and mammon. The powers said get a big gun and use it; that’s the only way to get things done. Jesus said that those who take up the sword perish by the sword. The powers said that Caesar was the most powerful ruler in the world. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God. The powers whipped us into [obedience] by threat of military force, Jesus ruled as a bleeding lamb upon a throne.

This is a very different King who rules a very different kingdom than what we are used to in this world, very different than what we have come to expect. This is why it is vital for us as Christians to remember to whom we belong ultimately ... it is not our checkbook or any security we think we might gain from having an armory ... it is not our nationality or even the nation of which we are citizens, however we confuse this all the time ... no, the only power to which we belong is the One who is THE King ... the one who calls us to love rather than hate, help rather than ignore.

Let me then end with the final words of Willimon’s sermon on this text:

Surprise. The cross was not the defeat of Christ by the powers; it was the defeat of the powers by the bloody cross of Christ. The powers – like lust, greed, fear, and all the rest – whisper to you that you can’t resist them. Go along to get along. Get a gun, or a fat bank account, and work the powers. But [the apostle] Paul says that these powers were defeated on the cross. They have no power over you. The battle has been won. Something decisive has been done about the powers.

Christ is King, not because we say so, but because God in his great mercy and love has made it so. This Sunday reminds us that Christ IS King over our lives and we are not ... but it poses the question: “How then shall we live?” And the answer we give will be demonstrated in that we do.