

What to Make of King and Kingdom Language Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-40
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The Sunday prior to the First Sunday in Advent, which is next week, always involves two major liturgical themes. Preachers generally chose one or the other. The first is that this is the Sunday before the Thanksgiving holiday. This theme provides a festive opportunity to reflect on the issue of gratitude. The other theme is that this Sunday is always designated as Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the liturgical church calendar before a new year starts with Advent. My preference is to alternate between themes each year. Therefore, since last year I preached on giving thanks, that means that this year it's on Christ the King. Aren't you lucky?!? Actually, since progressive Christians struggle with this concept, it's important and good to talk about this. So let's begin.

I am fully aware that there are many of us here in this congregation who aren't particularly comfortable with this archaic 'king' and 'kingdom' language. And we are not alone. In fact, the lectionary itself has come up with what they think is a bit less imperialistic language in also calling this the "Reign of Christ" Sunday. The word, 'reign,' however, still comes from the language of monarchy. But then again, "Christ our Democratically Elected Leader Sunday" doesn't really work either.

Before turning to a decidedly progressive approach to all this, let's look at a traditional understanding of Christ the King Sunday. **For it's hard to know where we're headed if we don't know where we've been.**

I found the following on the presbyterianmission.org website. "At the conclusion of the Christian year, the church gives thanks and praise for [the] sovereignty of Christ, who is Lord of all creation and is coming again in glory to reign." And here's an excerpt from the book, *Companion to the [Presbyterian] Book of Common Worship*, which is often used as a textbook in Presbyterian Polity classes at seminary.

The day centers on the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the whole universe... Christ reigns supreme. Christ's truth judges falsehood.

As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil.

Goodness, reading that makes me realize just how left of center I've become, theologically. And in all honesty, my current response after hearing those words is, **What is all that really supposed to mean, anyway?**

Taking a position at the other end of the theological spectrum, Bruce Epperly, currently serving as Visiting Professor of Process [Theological] Studies at Claremont School of Theology, offers a very different perspective. He writes:

Celebrating Christ the King Sunday seems anachronistic [outdated] in a pluralistic age, in which many Christians no longer subscribe to imperialistic, supercessionist, and exclusive theologies which deny truth and salvation to persons of other faiths.

He goes on to ask if there are not alternatives to a strict understanding of universal truths, imperialism and limited salvation. So in an admittedly critical vein he states:

Certain Christians have seen their faith as the sole source of truth and salvation. These are typically the ones who shout the loudest and assume any other Christian position is a betrayal of the one true faith, delivered to the saints.

In so doing, they succumb to authoritarianism, imperialism, coercion, and violence to peoples of other paths. This imperialism reflects the practices of ruthless sovereigns rather than the radical hospitable healer from Nazareth.

While I generally agree with Epperly's approach and analysis, I want to add my usual word of caution that we, in turn, don't become authoritarian, imperialistic, coercive, and spiritually violent toward those Christians who hold fast to the traditional, and yes even fundamentalist, beliefs of Christianity.

Is there, perhaps, a place somewhat in the middle (or lets be honest, still left of center) that we might find acceptable in our understanding of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior on this Christ the King Sunday? Notice first, however, that even traditional language specifically uses the word "Christ" or "Jesus Christ," not simply "Jesus." That might be the best place for us to start. **Progressive Christianity marks a strong distinction between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith.'**

In other words, there is an important difference in putting our emphasis on following the teachings of the radical Jewish itinerant spiritual leader and healer named Jesus of Nazareth, as opposed to simply giving our intellectual assent to all the theological attributes attached to the Church's historical understanding of Christ, which was developed after Jesus' death. Or as some of us have been reminded, "Jesus' last name was not Christ."

That difference is explored in the book currently being discussed in our congregation's Book Study Small Group. Its provocative title is, *How Jesus Became God*, by Bart Ehrman. Ehrman, as a historian, explores **the development and evolution of theological thought that transformed the understanding of Jesus as prophet to Jesus as God.** Here's the opening paragraph from the Introduction:

Jesus was a lower-class Jewish preacher from the backwaters of rural Galilee who was condemned for illegal activities and crucified for crimes against the state. Yet not long after his death, his followers were claiming that he was a divine being. Eventually they went even further, declaring that he was none other than God, Lord of heaven and earth. And so the question: How did a crucified peasant come to be thought of as the Lord who created all things? How did Jesus become God?

Provocative, indeed. Yet this indicates that the earliest Christians didn't necessarily believe the same things about the nature of Jesus that later traditional Christianity told folks they had to believe in order to call themselves a Christian.

I've said it before, and I'll say it time and time again. **The priority for those of us who identify ourselves as Christian should be on following the path and approach to life taught and modeled by Jesus, rather than on the continually divisive theological debates over ancient church doctrine. It is in through this constant conflict that it is partially responsible for turning many away from organized religion today.**

In other words, even though what we believe about God is very important, in the final analysis, what really matters is what we do with what we believe – how we put our faith and ethics into action. This is perhaps the best way to summarize a progressive approach to Christianity.

Saying that, let's try to make some sense out of what many of us do indeed consider to be patriarchal, hierarchical, and even oppressive language when we hear the words, "Christ the King." And perhaps that will help us filter the language roadblocks that we will sing in the three hymns selected this morning from the "Christ the King" section of our Presbyterian Hymnal.

In keeping with one of the common portrayals of God found in the Old Testament, that of an old gray-headed bearded man sitting on a king's throne, this kingly language was used by early Christians to ascribe Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of the prophecy for a messiah, which is the Hebrew word for Christ. For instance, our Gospel reading for today from Matthew 25 expresses it this way, "Jesus said to his disciples: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of glory.'" Most biblical scholars today now attribute those words to the gospel writer, not to Jesus himself. And many parables also emphasize this, like the one later in this passage that talks of a king who separates people like the sheep from the goats based on their actions of compassion for "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40).

We must never overlook the historical context of what it meant for the first Christians to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and King. It's not what many modern Christians think. For this declaration, by its very nature, is a subversive political statement, even more than it is a theological statement. **When first century Christians professed the kingship of Christ, and the kingdom of God in their midst, they were defiantly declaring that Caesar and the Roman Empire was *not* the king and kingdom to which they held their ultimate allegiance.** This counter-culture claim was a defiant way to overturn the dominant notions of power.

Therefore, **to profess that Christ is King or Lord, means that all other things in life are *not* !!** In this type of kingdom we witness to the power of love in the face of hate, peace in the face of conflict, and justice in the face of oppression. Perhaps, then, the

real question we should address on this Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the liturgical church year calendar, is this:

- **What would it look like if we allowed Christ to reign in our hearts and our lives?**

Or, in trying to make sense out of all this 'king' and 'kingdom' language, it might better be phrased this way:

- **What difference would it make in church and society if we gave our highest priority to living life in the way and manner revealed through the life and teachings of Jesus?**

That's Christianity!

So Happy Christ the King Sunday! And don't worry, next year the theme will be on Thanksgiving.

Amen.

¹ Blog of Cambridge Welcoming Ministries; <http://welcomingministries.blogspot.com/2009>