

“Christ the King”

– a Progressive Understanding

Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday

John 18:33-37 Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Kermit the Frog taught us that it's not always easy being green, being different from the norm. Being different from the norm is also not always easy as followers of progressive theology, an identifier of College Hill that we proudly print near the top of our worship bulletin each Sunday, along with traditional worship, and inclusive congregation. For instance, **it takes a lot of intentional effort to move away from ancient traditional church language, much of which has ended up being literalized and absolutized in modern Christianity.**

How to deal with this particular Sunday on the liturgical church calendar is an excellent case in point. Today is the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost, the final Sunday of the church year. We begin a new liturgical year next week with the First Sunday of Advent. But on the liturgical church calendar, today is always designated as Christ the King Sunday, or in only slightly less imperial terms, in an effort to seem less patriarchal, the Reign of Christ Sunday.

For many, and I expect that includes a majority of us in this community of faith, that draws moans and groans of justified discontent with the patriarchal, hierarchical, oppressive remnants in our Christian tradition. There was probably even some uneasiness just hearing the scripture passages being read a few moments ago. And therein lies the problem for those of us who identify on the progressive end on the theological spectrum.

Many of us struggle with, if not outright reject, the language of “king” and “kingdom.” For this gives the impression that God is: Male; Dominating; Subjugating; Hierarchical. That rightly creates a stumbling block to what we believe is a truer understanding of the nature and character of God. A God of love, grace, justice, forgiveness, and compassion, a God who goes before us, behind, above, below, beside, and within us – all qualities rarely associated with kings.

The easiest path for us is to simply ignore this Sunday and talk about something else, like the upcoming holiday of Thanksgiving. That's been my go-to solution for most years. But taking the easy path has not been our tradition. Our practice has been, and will continue to be, one that **questions church tradition, doctrine, and biblical interpretations, the hallmarks of the approach taken by progressive Christianity.** Therefore, as we have done in any number of other occasions when faced with archaic traditional language, **our goal is to reclaim words and phrases in a way to better understand the intent, even as its impact has often been damaging, especially to women.**

Let's first take a look at the Old Testament passage from Daniel 7. The metaphorical language used by the prophet to describe God has influenced the overriding image of God to this very day.

"As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool" (Dan. 7:9).

Using this language, **God is depicted as a cosmic monarch, with all the implications that come with that image.** Again, traditional Christianity has always had a tendency to take language that was *meant* to be metaphorical in nature and turn it into something literal, absolute, and then engrave it in granite. **To question God's hierarchical maleness is still considered heresy for many, if not most, Christians.**

Delwin Brown, author of *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*, counters, "Progressive Christianity seeks to unmask and reject the repressive view of God that has infected so much of Christianity." Yet, we have been stuck with king and kingdom language ever since. Then again, historically, transitioning from a monarchy form of government to a democracy is still a relatively new thing in human history.

Given our repulsion of monarchical expressions of power, we return to our dilemma, **what do we do with Christ the King Sunday?** Jill Duffield, when editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asked, "How do we wrestle with such authority in our cultural season of anti-institutionalism and conspiracy theories? How do we talk about obedience, or fear of the Lord, or reign of God, or the King of kings?" Good questions. One way, of course, often popular among progressives, is to **stop using hierarchal and patriarchal language altogether.** For the most part that is what we try to do. **That is why you will hear the term "kin-dom" substituted for "kingdom" metaphorically,** as we have done for quite some time now when reciting in unison The Lord's Prayer. **Kin-dom is a grass-roots relational term.** Yet, a legitimate question remains: What is gained and what is lost when we use "kin-dom" rather than "kingdom"? I encourage us to have that discussion.

More questions need to be asked. Like, what were the biblical authors trying to reveal about the nature and character of God, and on this particular Sunday, of Jesus as the King of kings? Here's part of the answer to that question. From their **historical perspective,** biblical authors in New Testament times were trying to contrast the type of divine kingship that Jesus represented from earthly kings – especially compared to the Roman emperor, who himself carried the title of lord and savior. **Therefore, to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and King was a subversive political 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.**

"Like so many other words, concepts and institutions," writes Jill Duffield, "the model of Jesus reframes, redefines, reforms and restores this one. Jesus' crown was made of thorns, not gold. He did not lord it over others and demand to be served like earthly rulers, but instead came *to serve*, and to call others to follow his example." **When we serve others, therefore, we are serving the Divine, the Sacred, what we call God, and as Christians, Christ.** And our service to others, and each other, like Jesus', is to be that of love and compassion. That's the power we wield.

We also wield the ability to speak truth to power and challenge our earthly rulers, as did Jesus. We witnessed this just this past week in those that stood up for Julius Jones in speaking truth to the power of our governor to pressure him to rescind Jones' death sentence, which was just hours away. We are called to do all these things, and more, not only as individuals, but also as a community of faith, as College Hill. But we don't limit it to that. We expand that to include the Interfaith community of differing faith traditions.

Jesus' form of kingship was something completely new. As recorded by the author of the Gospel of John, Jesus declared to Pilate at his trial, "My kingdom is not *from* this world." Authors of a commentary for Christ the King Sunday, part of the SALT Project, entitled "True Power," write:

What Jesus had in mind – in sharp contrast to Pilate – is a "kingdom" without a king, not an empire but rather a community of witnesses, testifying with words and deeds to the truth of God's love.

Jesus has in mind a very different form of power: not the brute, top-down power of a tyrant, the power of Pilate, but instead the true, bottom-up power of love and grace, the power of God. **What is true power? The power that takes the form not of a supreme monarch, but of a humble servant, a witness to the truth [of God's love]...**

In other words, the power that takes the very idea of monarchy and turns it inside out. It's this power – true power – that Jesus comes to embody and declare. **What is truth? Pilate asks. The answer, John proclaims, is standing right in front of him.**

Another biblical commentary, from welcomingministries.blogspot.com, rightly advise, "Rather than ignore or negate this notion of reign, we are called to re-claim it in a new way. **Reign implies a re-ordering of priorities, of norms, of commitments, of rules. A re-ordering in which mutuality has priority over patriarchal domination; in which peace has priority over violence and war; in which love wins out over hatred and fear.**

So yes, that's why we still have something called Christ the King, or Reign of Christ, Sunday. But I won't deny it, it still takes a lot of intentional effort on the part of us who identify as progressives to dig beneath the language and images that have often done more harm than good. **And yet, we still can't completely get away from all that language and images that we now find disturbing and harmful – at least not as Presbyterians.** Case in point, just try finding a hymn in our hymnal associated with the reign of Christ without having to sing the word, "king." Therefore, do we just tear out those pages that use offensive language to us?

You may have noticed that our Hymn of Response after this sermon is an interesting choice. Traditionally a Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World* is put to a different tune and included in a different section of our hymnal. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king." That takes on a new twist when sung in the context of a Sunday like this. So, as we sing today's hymns and listen to any number of scripture passages, **instead of rejecting the language and images altogether, simply run them through whatever filter is necessary for you to reclaim meaning and insight for your own journey of faith.**

And next week, we will begin our journey through the Season of Advent. Then, on Christmas Eve, we will again sing "Joy to the World."

Amen.

Resources:

Jill Duffield, "The Language of 'king' perplexes and confounds"; The Presbyterian Outlook, Nov. 19, 2018
 "True Power: SALT'S Lectionary Commentary for Reign of Christ the King Sunday," November 20, 2018
 "King". from welcomingministries.blogspot.com, Cambridge Welcoming Ministries