

# A Progressive Approach to “Christ the King”

## Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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It's not always easy being different. Case in point: identifying as progressive Christians. That means, in part, being different from traditional understandings of Christian doctrine, biblical interpretation, and even ministry focus. It takes a lot of intentional effort, for instance, to move away from ancient traditional church language, much of which has been literalized and absolutized in modern Christianity. That's something we don't think biblical authors expected to happen. Instead, they wrote primarily in metaphorical story-telling language.

Therefore, how do we deal with this particular Sunday on the liturgical church calendar, the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost, the final Sunday of the church year before we start a new church year with Advent next week? This particular Sunday 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. There was probably even some uneasiness just hearing the scripture passages being read a few moments ago.

Therein lies the problem for those of us who identify on the progressive end of the theological spectrum. **Many of us struggle with the language of “king” and therefore, “kingdom.”** For this gives the impression that God is: Male; Dominating; Subjugating; Hierarchical. That creates a stumbling block for many concerning what many of us 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 earthly 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. 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 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 and trappings that come with that image. Traditional Christianity has often**

taken 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.

Given our repulsion of monarchical expressions of power, we return to our dilemma, what do we do with Christ the King Sunday? 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's something I learned from my home-church pastor nearly 40 years ago. That is why, metaphorically, you will hear the term "**kin-dom**" substituted for "**kingdom**", 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, reflecting the society Jesus envisioned, an inclusive community of equals who serve each other.**

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 also carried the title of lord and savior. Therefore, to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and King was a subversive anti-empire 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 were not the king and kingdom to which they held their ultimate allegiance.** Quite the opposite of Christian Nationalism.

Jill Duffield, when editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, wrote, "Like so many other words, concepts and institutions, 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 we are serving the Divine, the Sacred, what we call God, and as Christians, Christ. And our service to others, and to each other, like Jesus', is to be that of love, humility, generosity, 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.

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." The 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 [and some politicians ever since], 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.

Contemplative activist Richard Rohr redefines an understanding of kingdom language this way.

The Kingdom is about union and communion, which means that it is also about mercy, forgiveness, nonviolence, letting go, solidarity, service, and lives of love, patience, and simplicity.

Who can doubt that this is the sum and substance of Jesus' teaching? In the Reign of God, the very motive for rivalry, greed, and violence has been destroyed. We know we are all part of God's Beloved Community.

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 effort on the part of those of us who identify as progressives to dig beneath the language and images that have often done a lot of harm when it comes to issues like equality and mutual relationships. 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." It's even in *Joy to the World*. So then, do we just tear out those pages that we feel use offensive language to us? No. Instead, simply run that language through whatever filter is necessary for you to reclaim meaning and insight for your own journey of faith.

And speaking of journeys, we begin a new one next Sunday as we journey through the Season of Advent on the way toward Christmas Day.

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](http://welcomingministries.blogspot.com), Cambridge Welcoming Ministries