

With Grateful Hearts

Psalm 100 & Matthew 25:31-46

Reign of Christ Sunday/ 23 November 2008

Today marks the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It's the culmination of the year that began on the first Sunday of Advent in 2007. Of all the Sundays in the liturgical calendar, it's probably the one most ignored, usually trumped by Thanksgiving, which is really a secular holiday (not on the liturgical calendar), although with a religious overtone to it. Yet, there is a connection between the two, as we will see (hopefully) before we're finished here.

The significance of Christ the King Sunday is sometimes lost on us, I think, is because Americans did away with monarchies a long time ago. To talk about Christ as King is a bit odd for us. We try to make it more accessible by calling it the Reign of Christ Sunday, but even this word is problematic. We get uncomfortable having anyone reign over us. Although, curiously, twice over the last month or so leading up to the presidential campaign, I heard news commentators refer to the "reign" of President Clinton and President Bush. It was a little jolting to hear these words together.

It's worth remembering that the liturgical year is modeled on the life of Christ. The template of Jesus' life and ministry become the framework for the ordering of time and space for Christians. The year tells the story of God's salvation through Jesus Christ – beginning with the promise in Advent, through his birth, death, resurrection, Christ's ascension, Pentecost, and then finally the Reign of Christ. Everything in Jesus' life leads to what this day signifies.

The Reign of Christ Sunday was first instituted by Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) in 1925, and now commemorated by most mainline churches.¹ The prayers for this day speak of Jesus' "sovereignty over every age and nation," and ask of God that "we may be the subject of [God's] dominion and receive the inheritance of your kingdom."² While the birth of Jesus in a humble manger speaks of Jesus meek and mild, there's also

¹ *Quas Primas* (Latin: *In the first*) was an encyclical of Pope Pius XI. Promulgated on December 11, 1925, it introduced the Feast of Christ the King. The encyclical summarizes both the Old Testament and the New Testament teaching on the kingship of Christ. Pope Pius XI took as his papal motto: "Christ's peace in Christ's kingdom." (Source: www.wikipedia.org)

² Recommended by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy and recommended by the Joint Liturgical Group of the Revised Common Lectionary. Cited in Ian Bradley, *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), 43.

another image of Jesus. My friend, Ian Bradley, might be on to something when in his book *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy*, he claims, “Previous ages have perhaps leaned too far in depicting and imagining Jesus Christ as a worldly emperor clad in purple robes and have overemphasised his regal power and triumph. We need to be careful not to lean too much the other way and overemphasise his humility and marginality at the expense of his majesty.”³

The Reign of Christ Sunday affirms the majesty, the royalty of Jesus, our servant king, descendent of David the shepherd-king who is the sovereign of the universe enthroned with God and the Spirit, who reigns over our lives with benign power, justice, and grace. This image of Jesus is beautifully rendered in countless Byzantine churches throughout Turkey and Greece. In brilliantly rich mosaics on the inside of their domes over and over again you see *Christos Pantocrator*, “Christ the Almighty,” who reigns over the all of God’s people living under the dome of God’s benevolent care, where all the sheep and the goats live. There’s a theological reason for the predominance of this image. The Greeks and later Byzantine name for the sovereign or king was *Basileus*. The term is related to the word *basilica*, a royal forum for the Roman emperor, later a place where Christians gathered to worship. It’s inside those basilica domes that we find the depictions of *Christos Pantocrator*.

I’m stressing the use of these words because embedded in the Greek is the profound emphasis of everything that Jesus taught, a Greek phrase that ties all of this together. Jesus came preaching and embodying and offering the *basileia tou theou*, the very reign of God, the kingdom of God. All the parables of the kingdom of God – the *basileia tou theou* – including this parable of the sheep and goats, are about Jesus announcing the good news of God’s reign over all the earth, who rules with generosity and grace, justice and joy, in extravagant, unconventional, even startling ways demonstrating for us the way the world is supposed to be, revealing God’s intent for creation, and God’s hope for all the people who live under the dome of Christ’s benevolent reign. God’s kingdom is like a dome covering our lives and the life Jesus calls you and me to is different from the life beyond that dome. Jesus called out disciples from the crowd – which is what the church means (*ek-klesia*), called out – to follow him, indeed commissions us to extend the reach of God’s reign, to advance the kingdom, to help realize the realm of God. Jesus calls us to expand the dome and invite all people to live in his realm, so that all might come to enjoy the benefits of living under the dome.

³ Bradley, 43.

The entire parable of the sheep and goats begins as a victory hymn to Christ set in the future, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory...” (Matthew 25:31). It’s why this text is chosen for today. This is Jesus’ parting lesson, the cumulative moment in his teaching ministry. Jesus enthroned in glory sees waves of humanity and he separates the “sheep” from the “goats” which is what a good shepherd does. Now, some might hear in this text a fairly conventional morality tale – those who do good deeds are rewarded and those who do not are punished. Therefore, we should all try to be sheep instead of goats. Is this all this story is about? If you think about it, how can a goat become a sheep? If that’s all this story is about, if that’s what Jesus’ judgment is about, there’s nothing unique here; similar kinds of teaching may be found in the religious literature of many cultures. There’s more going on here.

Did you notice that both the sheep and the goats are judged? The “twist in this parable is that the sheep had no idea whatsoever that, in their compassion toward people in need, they were providing ministry to the Son of Man, and, likewise, the goats had not a clue that, in their indifference, they were in fact neglecting the Lord of all the nations.” Both groups are stunned. The surprising reply is that whenever they acted – or failed to act – compassionately “to one of the least of these who are members of my family” (Matthew 25:40), they did so to Jesus Christ.⁴

And so the Christian church is sent out to the world on a vital mission of compassion – to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The “good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world,” Jesus said, “as a testimony to all the nations” (Matthew 24:14).

As a result, the Reign of Christ Sunday points us forward, not toward the world as it is, but the world as it shall be, when even the least of these are cared for because we know that even the least bear the image of Christ. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). This Sunday points us forward toward the world the Spirit is groaning to create in us and through us and for us. It points us toward the goal of history, so that we see the purpose of history and the purpose of lives being fulfilled. It’s a world where all the nations of the world are united under God, a place that resounds with the deafening praise of the nations.

To claim this as true is the foundation of our trust and hope in God’s sovereign rule over our lives and the cause for praise and thanksgiving. When we have confidence that someone is in charge over the universe, who reigns with benign power, justice, and grace, when we can trust that despite whatever hardships, difficulties, and

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 284.

pain we are enduring in the end, as Julian of Norwich (1343-c.1416) put it, “and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall we well,” then we can be at rest and peace and discover renewed energy to give of ourselves to each other with compassion. When we stop worrying about the future because we know the future is in God’s hands, something amazing happens – we are free to face the present and free to be present to the needs of the people around us, free to be compassionate and kind and giving.

It was striking on Friday afternoon watching the stock market. It was just barely moving up or down, just lingering there, waiting for direction, some kind of confidence. The moment it was announced that the New York Federal Reserve President Timothy Geithner will be President Elect Obama’s choice for treasury secretary, the market began to rally ending up close to 500 points above the day before. Having lost a lot of confidence in Secretary Paulson of late, Wall Street seemed confident in the ability of the Geithner to lead, to provide a way, and the market soared. Not the best analogy, perhaps. We don’t know what kind of job he’ll do. But it speaks to the freedom that comes when we can trust those with considerable power to affect our lives.

To live our lives as Christians knowing whom we can ultimately trust, frees us to be all the more for God and for each other. Knowing Christ’s rule of our lives, knowing that God is sovereign, actually lightens our hearts. Do you know what happens then? We’re free to offer up our hearts, our lives, to God with gratitude, thanks and praise. God is in charge, which means we don’t have to be. Even when times are difficult and we are anxious about the future, we claim that the future belongs to God and God is faithful.

Sovereignty. Freedom. Gratitude. Thanks. Praise. Hearts. These are all words near and dear to the Reformed theological tradition. Presbyterians have always stressed these ideas and experiences. It’s reflected in Calvin’s (1509-1564) own personal motto, a motto with an image of a flaming heart placed in an open palm, lifted up and offered to God.⁵ Because he was assured of God’s sovereignty over the universe and therefore over his life, in gratitude, he was free to offer up his heart freely to God. And so can you. We’re also free to offer our hearts to the person on our right or left, before us or behind us.

It’s maybe why the author of psalm 100 could pen those ancient words and make such audacious claims in the face of a world where it might appear the very opposite was true. I like to call this the Presbyterian Psalm, to me it captures the joy and praise

⁵ Calvin’s motto: *Cor meum tibi, offero, Domine prompte et sincere.* (My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.)

of the Christian life stressed by Presbyterians (although we're not alone in this), of worship worthy of the God who is sovereign and faithful and good. We can indeed worship Yahweh with gladness and are eager to come to God's presence with singing. Yahweh is God. We are not alone. God made us and we belong to God and, as Jesus taught us with his life, nothing can ever change this fact. We are God's people, the sheep (and goats) of God's pasture.

Therefore as long as we have hearts that beat and songs to sing,
we approach God with thanks-giving
and the presence of Yahweh with nothing less than praise.
For time and time again we know that Yahweh is good;
from time's beginning until to its end,
God's steadfast and unwavering,
persistent and inexorable love endures forever, and
God's faithfulness,
God's commitment,
God's covenant,
God's compassion extends to all generations.

And so the church responds with compassion and service,
provoked to praise and adoration and "Amen,"
with thanksgiving and
gratitude and
Alleluia and more
Alleluias.
And ever longing for Christ's advent among us,
we forever pray:
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come.

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