

“AND JESUS SHALL REIGN”

Luke 23:33-43; Ephesians 1:15-23

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People do not choose Christ the King Sunday when asked to pick their favorite day in the Christian calendar. Most hardly know it even exists. It often gets lost in the Thanksgiving holiday or in the beginning of the Advent season. We often do a little extra promotion of church events at this time of year, but I don't ever recall including it in the list of must-come-to events that we put out there. There are in fact a couple things about it that make it a tough sell.

To begin with, we don't believe in “kings” in this country. From the founding of our nation, we have rejected monarchy. Our first constitution limited the powers of government so much that it had to be rewritten after only ten years. As we all know, the new constitution expanded governmental powers, but put in place a rather complicated system of checks and balances that would make it impossible for anything like a king or queen to arise. We call it democracy, though the more accurate term is “republic.”

So it's difficult for us to understand, let alone apply, this idea of Christ the King. Oh, we use the language of “sovereignty,” referring to Jesus as our Lord. We talk about the “kingdom” of God and of “following” Jesus; but with respect to living our lives, we value freedom and self-determination. And when we're not too cynical, we participate in democracy. We vote.

This is one of the things that makes it difficult for us to understand the Bible generally and the words of Jesus more specifically. We sometimes forget that the Bible knows nothing of democracy. We forget that Jesus never voted, that his activity was severely restricted by the government and his words monitored closely by government-appointed, so-called religious leaders of the day. Paul had no other model for talking about Jesus' relationship to the church than the authoritarian structure of the Roman Empire. These are uncomfortable words: “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things in subjection under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church...”

This is not “what would Jesus do” theology. This is not about imitating Jesus so that we can make good moral choices. We're not used to this Jesus-in-command image. We prefer the friend we have in Jesus, the Jesus who welcomes the little children, the Jesus who forgives sinners from the cross, the Jesus who feeds the multitude, cures diseases, and tells a good story. We seldom think about the Jesus who demands: “Take up your cross...Love your enemies... sell all that you have.”

Christ the King, the “head over all things,” – are we even listening for the command of Christ? Are we taking our lead from Jesus in all things or have we relegated him to a limited moral and religious sphere? This day bids us to expand our image of Jesus as Lord of our spirits to the Lord of our lives. It reminds us that Jesus not only taught us to pray, but called us to let the oppressed go free. He not only taught us to feed the hungry, but crossed the boundaries

that traditionally separated the righteous from the sinner, the accepted from the rejected, and the friend from the stranger. As our Lord, he shows us not only a path to be right with God, but shows us how to make peace with our neighbor.

Some have suggested these past couple weeks that we should remember that God is still in charge of the world, that we should hand over our fears and believe that God would make things right in the end. They might even refer to this image of Christ as King from Ephesians. But here they misunderstand the nature of kingdoms and the kind of control that God chooses to exercise. Kings need the support of others. Kings need the ears and the hearts of the people. Tyrants may rule for a little while, but without the love of the people, they eventually fall.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that God is not in control of this world, that Christ the King is in fact despised by a large number of people. That won't change until the followers of Jesus take their faith out of the pew and exercise it in the world. It won't change until we listen to the command of Jesus to take the love that we have for one another and share it with the world.

Jesus will reign when we are more inclined to exercise mercy instead of judgment. Jesus will reign when we finally get a handle on our fear of the stranger and extend the hand of hospitality. Jesus will reign when we attend to the cries of the oppressed and disenfranchised. Jesus will reign when we declare hate unacceptable and we love our neighbors without regard to the color of their skin, their ethnic origin, their sexual or gender orientation, or their economic class. Jesus will reign when we stop regarding the earth as a resource for our own profit and treat it as a gift from God deserving of our respect and care. Jesus will reign when the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick and imprisoned are visited, and the captives released.

Regardless of your political party or who you voted for in the last election, those who would follow Christ care about these things and others as well. We aren't all called to the same tasks, but we are all called to exercise faith in the world. The reign of Christ is not only for the "age to come" but for "this age" as well. Jesus cannot reign when we settle for escape from this life in the hope of a better life to come. We pray for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven." Love, justice, and mercy are not optional for those who would follow Jesus, for those who would see the reign of Christ.

Christ the King Sunday is not a day in which we give over our responsibility to Jesus. Rather we remember the one who loves us and gave himself up for us. We recall Christ's mercy, celebrate his love, and ask for strength to follow his example, and discernment to hear his call. We recommit ourselves to loving God and neighbor, to overcoming evil with good, and to a vision of justice and mercy. May God grant us peace and strength and love for this journey ahead. Amen.