

“MAKING SPACE TO KNEEL”

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:9-20
November 24, 2019 ~ Christ the King Sunday
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Introduction to the Colossians reading: Colossians is a letter written, probably by the Apostle Paul, to encourage the Christian church at Colossae (a city in what is now Turkey) to remain steadfast to the faith, and to steer them away from some wrong beliefs. The language here references the belonging to Christ that is signified in baptism. This passage also incorporates what seems to be an earlier poem or hymn – something familiar to the recipients of the letter – about the person and power of Christ.

Read Colossians 1:9-20

I came across this brief prayer in a prayer book the other day:

“Teach us to proclaim with our lives that we have no God but you.”

That struck me immediately as being a perfect prayer for Christ the King (or the Reign of Christ) Sunday... which someone has called “a most peculiar Christian holiday.” This is also a relatively new part of the liturgical calendar, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. At that time – not so long after a wholly new and horrifying kind of war had devastated Europe – Mussolini’s fascists had recently taken over the government in Italy, Stalin was in power in the Soviet Union, Hitler had just published *Mein Kampf*. Secularism was on the rise along with totalitarianism. A day emphasizing Christ’s ultimate rule was the Catholic Church’s way of declaring that no other power can claim the ultimate loyalty of those who belong to Christ, and that ultimately – no matter how bad things may look now – Jesus will reign and the will of God will be done.

Christ the King Sunday is kind of the liturgical equivalent of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, which we have in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions. That statement of faith, written within the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930’s, declares that Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church – not the state. It was a courageous and dangerous stand in that place and time, but an important theological affirmation that continues to guide us today.

I’m not sure just when Protestant churches began to observe Christ the King Sunday, but somewhere along the line they did, and in 1970, the observance of this day was moved from its original time in late October to the last Sunday of the liturgical year ... so it becomes a culmination of the whole story of Jesus: we acknowledge him as “Christ the King,” and then we begin the story again as we move into Advent.

But it is a peculiar day. Especially in America, it seems like it might be a bit outdated and out of step. We may like to read gossip about royalty but we aren't inclined to recognize the kind of hierarchy of status implied by a monarchical society. In fact, most of us tend to feel pretty strongly against a subservient role of any kind. Even when we think about Jesus, we are more comfortable with him as the compassion of God, our friend and companion, our brother, an example of how to live a truly human life.

But the Reign of Christ Sunday asks us to bow down.

Now when I say that, you know I don't necessarily mean physically getting down on your knees to pray and worship – although that's certainly a possibility. But I'm thinking more of a metaphorical kneeling, a yielding of the heart and the will and the self. The poet Rumi said "There are a thousand ways to kneel...."

But we aren't too big on any of them. We don't like to admit weakness; we fear loss of autonomy. We hear the Psalmist say "Come, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker." But we resonate more with what Aragorn tells the fellowship at the end of the Lord of the Rings trilogy: "My friends, you bow to no one."

We have heard the message over and over, from all kinds of sources:

"I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." (poet William Ernest Henley)

"Have it your way."

"It's all about you."

But this day, and our scripture readings tell us something different.

Today, we are called to pray:

"Teach us to proclaim with our lives that we have no God but you."

And it is a relevant prayer, not just for this day, but for our day.

We human beings have tried – and tried – being "masters of our own fate," but we generally find out that we are not really in control of all that much. We continue to believe that science and technology will solve every problem, but some of our most pressing problems are only getting worse.

The things that were happening in 1925 are happening again (or still). Nationalism has become a major political force in many places and the results are ugly. Every day we hear about acts of hate by individuals and acts of aggression by governments against other countries or their own people. Authoritarian leaders have come to power around the world. To some people, these movements seem self-protective, necessary, a reasonable response to changes they don't like. But they are doomed because they are driven by fear and hold on to power by means of fear.

The number of people who claim no religious faith or affiliation has risen dramatically over the past ten years... but the human need for meaning hasn't lessened. Religious and non-religious people alike now seek meaning, validation, a way to define what is good, ...salvation, even, in other things: work, romance, busyness, parenting, leisure, food, politics. But fervor for these religion substitutes tends to lead us to feeling that we need to be better, or more, or different. It's not just that devotion to any of those things implies standards of perfection that are hard to achieve. I think maybe it's also because these paths are essentially all about *us*. And weirdly, paradoxically, that focus on crafting the perfect life for ourselves is not freeing but anxiety producing.

In contrast: a couple of years ago the Catholic bishops of the Philippines chose as their slogan for the year: "If we want renewal, let us learn how to kneel again."

"There are a thousand ways to kneel..." but there is no space for kneeling unless we can get ourselves out of the way.

The Reign of Christ Sunday is an annual invitation to do that, to reorient ourselves to the all-encompassing claim of Christ on our lives.

Today we pray, "Teach us to proclaim with our lives that we have no God but you."

The words of Colossians hold before us the authority of Christ over... everything:

- Over the cosmos
- Over the world and all the powers that be
- Over the church
- Over the lives and loyalties of believers.

They remind us that Jesus
Shows us what God is like
Reconciles all things
Claims us
Holds everything together.

This is why we kneel down or look up at the sky, stand in silent awe or sing praises with all our hearts. This is how we know who we are. This is why we ask, "What would Jesus do?" This is how we keep all our other loyalties in perspective. This is how we know that there is no part of our lives we can keep back or keep separate from the authority of Christ.

There isn't "the stuff that belongs to God" and "stuff that doesn't." Everything belongs to God, and every part of our lives, everything the church does, every human endeavor and every corner of the world matters to God. Against all our hopelessness, Colossians urges us to believe that the redemption of all that is broken is possible. Environmental devastation. Racist systems. Dysfunctional families. Inequitable economies. Bad leadership. Churches stuck in ruts. Sexist culture. Entertainment that celebrates

ignorance. All things may be redeemed. We don't give up, because we believe in the reconciling, redeeming, holding-together power of Jesus Christ.

That power, that reign, Colossians tells us, is established – paradoxically – through the cross. Jesus is a different kind of ruler. One of the most iconic “Christ the King” images is Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. He is the power of God united in solidarity with human suffering. His reign, therefore, is different from the coercive, self-aggrandizing, fear-based, extractive power that we experience in the world.

The prophet Jeremiah provides a powerful image of the kingdom of God: a shepherd who rescues the sheep, ends their oppression, gathers them together, brings them home, cares for them, allows them to have fruitful lives, establishes justice, assures their safety and well-being.

We do not need to be afraid to honor this kind of authority, to give our lives to it, to kneel. We don't have to fear losing ourselves, our identity, our freedom, our dignity, our fragile hold on control. Because we belong to Jesus, who forgives us and gives us back our selves, who loves us, who wants only what is good for us. He gives us the strength we need to resist the unworthy things that clamor for our loyalty. He gives us the hope that allows us to go on being a part of his reconciling work in the world.

Today, we pray:

“Teach us to proclaim with our lives that we have no God but you.” Amen.

Resources:

“Christ the King, King of Kings,” by Kevin Williamson, November 26, 2017, thenationalreview.com

“*Invictus*” by William Ernest Henley

Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.

Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became our New Religions and What to Do about It, by David Zahl, 2019, Fortress Press