

“CONNECTING TO CHRIST”

Psalm 46; Colossians 1:9-20

November 20, 2022

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Christ the King: last Sunday of the church year, often overshadowed by the Thanksgiving festivities, and problematic for some preachers. Problem number one: How do we distinguish this day from Palm Sunday when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and is acclaimed as the coming Messiah, the King of the Jews? Problem number two: How do we talk about Jesus as king in a culture that has never lived under a monarchy, indeed, became a nation in reaction against monarchies? And what do we do with the fact that Jesus seemed opposed to hierarchies of any sort?

As for the first problem, this day is less about Jesus of Nazareth and more about the “Christ” revealed in the birth, life, death, resurrection, teaching, healing, and wonder-working of Jesus. This emphasis on the Christ anticipates Advent, the beginning of the church year, and serves as a book end to the idea that God is entering our world. The Gospel of John tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Matthew describes the birth of Jesus as the birth of Immanuel, God-with-us. At the end of the year, we return to this idea as we think about Christ the King.

It’s very important that we don’t say, “Jesus Christ the King.” Richard Rohr opens his book, *The Universal Christ*, by reminding us that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. Christ is so much bigger than the life of one human being. There is no question that Jesus of Nazareth revealed the character and will of God in unsurpassed ways; but to speak of Jesus as incarnating God, making God visible, is not the same as equating him with God. Rohr writes, “We would have helped history and individuals so much more if we had spent our time revealing how Christ is everywhere instead of proving that Jesus was God” (p.48).

There’s a lot to ponder in that statement, which we will be doing during adult education during Advent as we study Rohr’s book. Today, I want to move us away from the storyline of Palm Sunday which focused on Jesus of Nazareth, and instead think about the Christ who enters the world again and again and again. This is what Paul does in writing to the Colossians. He goes well beyond what we might say about the very human Jesus. His description is specifically of the Christ: “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,” - all things, “visible and invisible” were created by Christ, - Christ is “before all things,” holding everything together – Christ is the “head of the body, of the church... the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” – In Christ, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

Paul does the same thing as John does in his Gospel. He projects an understanding of the Christ all the way back to and before creation. Theologians refer to this as the “pre-existent Christ,” a term I’ve always found a little off-putting... partly because some thinkers use the idea to get Jesus and hence the Trinity into the creation story of Genesis

1. Don't get me wrong. Jesus is vital to the understanding and practice of my faith, but Jesus of Nazareth was not around at the creation of the world. Jesus made the invisible God visible. Jesus challenged our assumptions about what God was like, and demonstrated how God wanted people to live. Jesus made space for the people of God to gather as a community of living faith. Jesus was the Christ, but so few people in human history have ever had the opportunity to know him.

What do we do about the people who lived before and after Jesus? What do we do about all the people contemporary with Jesus, but living beyond Palestine, beyond the territories of the Roman Empire? For these, there is the Christ. Within our own tradition, Christ has appeared many times: in the woman who came to the man and ended his loneliness, in the angel who appeared to Hagar in the wilderness, providing water and a promise for her and her son Ishmael, in Moses sent to release the people of God from slavery, in Cyrus, the Persian Ruler who granted permission to the Jewish exiles to return home; in numerous prophets who reminded the people of their responsibility for the poor, the forgotten, and the oppressed; in a woman from Samaria willing to share the living water she received from a Jew named Jesus; in the Syrophenician woman willing to argue with Jesus for the sake of her very sick daughter; in Paul as he extended the offer of salvation beyond his own faith tradition. One wonders if there is ever a time or place where Christ is not present. Richard Rohr argues that "the proof that you are a Christian is that you can see Christ everywhere else" (p.51).

So, that should distinguish the Palm Sunday King that we praise the Sunday before Easter from the Christ King we ponder on this day which moves us on to problem two: What do we do with "the king?" In previous years, I've addressed this problem by contrasting the kind of king Jesus is from how we think about kings in general. Often the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head, a crown that represents his willingness to suffer on behalf of his people, forms the main thrust of the discussion.

This morning, I'll take a different approach. Jesus says to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36). Paul elaborates on this when he writes, "Christ has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." I want to address the problem of Christ as king in light of the "kingdom Christ rules."

The first thing to say about Christ's kingdom is that its borders encompass the whole world. Created by and for Christ, sustained and upheld by Christ, and most importantly entered into by Christ, firstborn of all creation. The Psalmist tells us that "the earth is the Lord's," all of it! So we're not talking about one kingdom among many. The issue isn't about territory, but about faithfulness, about whether we embrace our place within creation or act as usurpers and attempt to rule over creation. Will we choose to be in harmony with nature or advance our own interests at the expense of creation? Will we partner with Christ or betray Christ?

Brian McLaren writes in the foreword of Rohr's book: "Religion is about creating the world that we and future generations will inhabit" (p. xi). Honesty demands that we acknowledge

that religion hasn't always improved it. McLaren remarks that "... a lot of people are sick to death of the theological industrial complex: It has helped certain people create a world that is hurting other people and the planet" (p. xii).

Theological gymnastics taught the church that it was okay to slay Muslims in order to free the Holy City from the hands of "infidels." It taught the church to value purity of dogma over loving one's neighbor. Theological gymnastics justified slave owners, Jim Crow, and white supremacy. It excused conquest, genocide, domestic violence, and terrorism. Theological gymnastics showed us how to look down on women, minorities, refugees, and, well, anyone outside our norms. Religion bears the bulk of the blame for our abuse of the earth. And yet, McLaren sees in Rohr's book an understanding of faith in which "better things become possible" (p. xiii).

Much depends on connecting to Christ, partnering with Christ. Too often we have used our faith in Christ to adopt a place of privilege in Christ's kingdom. Created in the image of God, we suppose ourselves to be masters of nature rather than its servants or caretakers. Jesus calmed the storm. Our careless abuse of the earth's resources stirs them up. Christ sustains creation. We use it up and toss it aside. We might connect to Christ through nature, if we would but take the time to notice the beauty, wonder, and harmony of the natural world. The rain forest that refreshes the air we breathe, the soil that produces the food we eat, and rivers that replenish the soil. Creation is not the sort of "kingdom" where its elements vie for positions of authority. It's the sort of place where "all things work together for good for those who love God the Creator.

Even when the world gets a little rough, "when the mountains shake and the rivers roar," God remains a refuge says the Psalmist. There are "rivers that make glad the city of God." When trouble comes God will be there "in the midst of the city." Even then Christ comes, offering comfort to those who mourn, a home for the homeless, food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, strength for those who are weary.

There is no better way to connect to the Christ among those in need, than through the Christ who creates and sustains the beloved community. "Beloved Community," writes David Dark, "invites us to turn our clichés into lived realities, to revalue devalued people, and to think harder about our own thinking, thus representing the better, coming world in our tired and troubled one" (p. 164).

On Christ the King Sunday, we may recall the Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, for he was no conquering hero on his way to the palace to rule over his people. He goes to the temple to reclaim it as place of prayer for the people.

But perhaps more importantly, on Christ the King Sunday as we close out the church year, we celebrate that Christ comes. Christ comes to help the city in the midst of its troubles. Christ comes to destroy the weapons of war and make peace. Christ comes in the stillness for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Christ comes to heal the earth. Christ comes maybe not so much to restore the kingdom, not as one to conquer and judge and rule; but as one with compassion to restore the beloved community, the loved

by God community. We celebrate Christ the King remembering the many ways we may have connected to Christ in the year past; and as we move into Advent, looking forward to the Christ who will come again and again and again. Amen.

Resources:

Dark, David. *The Possibility of America: How the Gospel Can Mend our God-Blessed, God-Forsaken Land*. Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY, 2019.

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We, See, Hope For, and Believe*. Convergent Books: New York NY, 2021.