

“THE REIGN OF CHRIST”

Psalm 47; Matthew 27:11-36

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Psalm 47 is a celebratory and beautiful psalm... but – although we can grasp its meaning - its imagery isn't necessarily the most familiar to us. It comes from a long-ago and very different time. I suspect few of us have ever actually seen a king, and in the U.S., we tend to view the idea of monarchy with a certain amount of suspicion. Kings as portrayed in literature and film can be just, benevolent, and heroic, but are just as often cruel, autocratic, or greedy. “King” probably isn't the first word any of us would come up with to describe God. There are so many other words and images we can use, including some that are less overtly masculine. Contemporary translations of psalms like this one sometimes help to make the gist of them more comprehensible to the modern reader, using, for example, words like “sovereign” and “governor,” as in a translation of Psalm 47 I looked at. But I didn't choose to use that translation, because I got to thinking about the origins of this psalm. This is one of those places where context matters.

Now, the psalms include few clues about the specific circumstances in which they were written, but it's generally believed that most of them date from the period when Israel was ruled by kings. Probably they include the writings of a number of different people, but the psalms have always been associated with King David. He may have written some of them, or supported the writing of them, for use in festivals and worship, which at that time were centralized in Jerusalem. David's reign and Solomon's after him were thought of as the “golden age” of Israel's monarchy. It was a time of relative peace and prosperity. The demand that the people had made of God, to have a king like all the other nations, seemed to have paid off.

And in that context, there is this psalm – song - that aggressively asserts that it is God who is the king. The world doesn't belong to the king in the palace, no matter what it looks like. The people don't belong to him. True power doesn't belong to him, either. The psalm repeats it several times to make the point: God is the true sovereign, and the people had better not forget it.

Christ the King Sunday also feels like it comes to us from an ancient and very different time. But interestingly enough, this is not actually one of the holy days that go back to the early church, like Pentecost or Easter, but is relatively recent in origin. Christ the King Sunday was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 – the observance is 99 years old this year.

To understand what prompted this, it's useful to know what was happening in the world at that time. 1925 was the year that Adolf Hitler published the first volume of *Mein Kampf*. Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy. Communist governments and leaders were consolidating power. In the United States, membership in the Ku Klux Klan was something like 5 million – the

largest fraternal organization in the country. Anti-immigrant feeling was high and nationalist sentiment was growing around the globe.

Again, context tells us a lot.

Pope Pius was trying to counter what he perceived to be unhealthy nationalism and increasing secularism in the world. He saw people turning to “strong man” leaders who fostered these movements. He was concerned about people turning away from the values of faith and about persecution of the church and clergy in some parts of the world. In that situation, he called on the church to affirm the sovereignty of Christ over all creation and to recognize that a Christian’s first allegiance is to Christ. A few years later, the Confessing Church in Germany would make that same affirmation in the Barmen Declaration – which is part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions to this day. No matter where Christians live or what cultures they belong to, they are supposed to be guided first and foremost by their values as followers of Christ.

It’s sobering to consider that context, particularly because it sounds so familiar to us. Nationalism and anti-immigrant violence are rising threats in our world, too. And it’s especially troubling when nationalism is joined to a form of Christianity that regards some groups of people as less valuable and aspires to hold wide-ranging power.

I almost hesitated to go with a reign of Christ emphasis today, wondering if we ought to even continue to mark this particular Sunday, given that it could easily be misunderstood or twisted to support this idea of Christians ruling everyone else by force in the name of Jesus. But what better time to think about what the reign of Christ – the kingdom of God, as Jesus put it – really means – and what it means to us.

Recently a former leader of a large protestant denomination told in an interview about conversations he’d been having with pastors. He said that multiple pastors had told him about giving sermons in which they quoted from the Sermon on the Mount – things Jesus said about forgiveness, loving neighbors and enemies, giving to those who ask, being humble, and so on – only to have congregants ask afterward, “where did you get those liberal talking points?” The pastors would say, “I was quoting Jesus.” And the response would be “That doesn’t work anymore. That’s weak.”

There are – probably always have been – those who’ve kind of “reimagined” Jesus as warrior, crusader, tough-on-sin guy who wields authority in a rigid hierarchy of true believers who he promises to lead to power and prosperity. This vision doesn’t appeal to me but it definitely appeals to a lot of people. And maybe it does “work” (whatever that means) ... at least if you want to accomplish certain things – power and prosperity. But this is not the Jesus of the gospels. This is not the kingdom of God Jesus spoke about. This is not the calling of Jesus’ people. This is definitely *not* what Christ the King Sunday is about.

One of the scriptures often read on this day is Matthew 25, where Jesus says “whatever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do to me.” And it’s also typical to read from some part of the gospel stories about Jesus’ suffering and death, like the passage we heard from Matthew’s gospel. These are just some of the gospel texts that help us see what the reign of Christ *is* about... and why, yes, in fact, it *doesn’t* work if affluence and control of others are your goals. It doesn’t work, if the goal is to avoid suffering, please people, stay away from those who are different or needy, and always look strong.

The realm of God has different goals and different means.
The realm of God is not about taking over the world, but loving it.
Not about coercing others, but serving them.

In the realm of God, the throne is a cross. In the realm of God, there is no desire for “power over” others; if Jesus turns away from that, so must we. In the realm of God, forgiveness is more important than anger or revenge. Truth is more powerful than the most comfortable or convenient lies. In the realm of God, the needs of the poor and the sick and the rejected are priorities; gentleness is valued and violence is not admired. In the realm of God, there is power in vulnerability, sacrifice, solidarity, humility, compassion. In the realm of God there is strength in community and in prayer.

When Jesus says, “follow me,” this is where he wants to lead us, and these are the values that he hands us. I know these are also the values we want to live. A part of that, in these days, is to use our voices and act in any ways we can to counter the unholy melding of Christianity with nationalistic, coercive, or racist visions of the world. It’s also to bring our faith and values in healing and generous and respectful ways into public life; separating our faith from what we do “out there” is just another form of acquiescence to values antithetical to the realm of God.

But to honor the reign of Christ is challenging to us in more personal ways, too.

When we say that God is sovereign, we acknowledge that our faith is for all parts of our lives, and speaks to every human activity and concern. This means we can’t draw a line of separation between what’s “religious” in our lives and what’s “secular.” We live every moment in the presence of Christ.

Living in the reign of Christ means we have to resist some of the things our culture tells us about what it means to be strong, successful, likeable, or important. It means we have to think carefully about who and what we admire, who and what we listen to. It means we have to refuse some things that are expected of us, maybe reconsider our priorities. It means unlearning ideas we were taught. Sometimes it means we have to give up something we want, or do something we’d rather not do.

It’s challenging and difficult even to ask the question, “what does it mean to say that Christ rules in my life?”

I suspect that all of us are aware of some part of our lives where the reign of Christ is less than complete. Something the Spirit is nudging us to do. Something we need to let go of. Something that needs healing. Some truth we need to acknowledge. A hope we need to claim.

This would seem impossibly daunting and even a little threatening except for one thing: the reign of Christ is a reign of love. Jesus does not force us to do anything or be anything. The reign of Christ is a realm of freedom, and in it all our gifts have a place.

What's more, we are already loved, even before we hear Jesus say, "follow me." Even as we come to understand that following Jesus may take us to places of sacrifice and service and relinquishment, we also come to understand that Jesus is a different kind of leader, and that he goes alongside us.

The reign of Christ is not a realm of fear but of peace, so we do not have to be ruled by fear. Paul writes to the Colossians, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..." (Colossians 3:15a)

Let's take that with us, this Reign of Christ Sunday. When the peace of Christ rules in our hearts, we can have the courage and strength to bring the values of the realm of God into our lives and into our world, whatever we're doing, and wherever we go.

Amen.

Resources:

A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Wilda C. Gafney

"November 24, Reign of Christ Sunday" by T. Denise Anderson, *The Christian Century*, November 2024

Interview with Rev. Russell Moore, NPR *All Things Considered*, August 5, 2023.