

Church of the Crossroads
Reign of Christ
November 26, 2006
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THE ALLEGIANCE THAT FREES

2 Samuel 23:1-7
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-9
John 18:33-37

Welcome, again, everyone, to this service marking the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, we will begin a new liturgical year with our celebration of the First Sunday of Advent. This is all a little strange for us since so many are already celebrating Christmas, and we haven't even begun to celebrate Advent!

Today, though, we still find ourselves located in an old year celebrating a Sunday that I, for one, find just a little problematic. This Sunday is known as the "Reign of Christ," or, as it is called by those who are less inclined to use inclusive language, "Christ the King."

The thematic designation for this Sunday is relatively new. It was first suggested in 1925 and was adopted officially by the ecumenical church in 1969. As you have already detected from the scripture readings for today, the language of royalty and kingship shapes the theme of this day. God is King; Christ is King.

The language of kingship is just a little difficult for North American Christians to wrap their lives around. We do not live in a culture of kings. Even most Canadians look upon the idea of kings and queens with suspicion.

There's something even more troublesome about this Sunday than just the language of kingship, and that is the spirit of triumphalism that dominates the day. Christendom just loves the language of kingship and the idea of a triumphal Christ. It fits in nicely with the glory and power of earthly empires and kingships.

Lost in the language of today is any meaningful theology of the cross. In the reading from the Book of Revelation, there is a mention of the cross,

but the cross comes across as just a stepping stone to the glory and dominion that belong to a kingdom, the Kingdom of Christ, “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. . . to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

With all of the problems associated with this Sunday, though, there may be something incredibly worthwhile to be found in it if we keep our minds and our hearts open to new truths and understandings. After dwelling on the problems associated with the day, I said to myself: “Neal, you are going to have to think more deeply.”

I first thought of John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation. This John, not to be confused with the writer of the 4th Gospel, lived under the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian who ruled from the year 81 to the year 96. Domitian waged a number of persecutions against members of the Christian community, and John was one of them. Because of his faith, he was sent into exile to the Island of Patmos where he wrote his book. We know that the Book of Revelation invites all kinds of strange speculation and misuse, but most basically it is a writing that employs apocalyptic themes and images in order to present a critique of and a judgment against the Roman Empire. With this in mind, I began to understand John’s allegiance to the kingdom of Christ as an allegiance that set him free to write his book. If for John, Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth, then it follows that the Emperor Domitian is not the powerful dictator he is thought to be. He pales in comparison with Christ. John, then, is set free to envision the fall of Domitian and his empire. The Book of Revelation is political commentary as much as it is anything else.

Then, I thought of the reading from 2 Samuel, which is known as “the last words of David.” King David is the speaker, and the speech is the language of poetry:

The spirit of God speaks through me,
 God’s word is upon my tongue.
 The God of Israel has spoken,
 The Rock of Israel has said to me:
 One who rules over people justly,
 ruling in the fear of God,
 is like the light of morning,
 like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,

gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.
2 Samuel 23:2-4

The just earthly ruler rules in the fear of God. The fear of God, in this passage, is not a “scared to death” fear, but a fear that is akin to awe and deep respect. Earthly rulers who rule in the fear of God will exercise leadership that is just and good. God is sovereign. The sovereignty exercised by King David is a derived sovereignty. As long as earthly rulers acknowledge this, that their sovereignty is a derived, secondary sovereignty, they will be like “the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.” Acknowledging the sovereignty of God, the earthly ruler is set free to rule justly. Allegiance to God is an allegiance that frees.

Then, there is the contrasting case of Pilate. Pilate is so fearful for his own power and authority that he cannot understand Jesus when he says that his kingdom is not from this world. Pilate has nothing to fear from Jesus. There is something inside Pilate that knows this, but he cannot bring himself to exercise just leadership and release Jesus. Instead, he lets the crowd decide.

In the end, I began to see the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of Christ as a sovereignty that sets human beings free, indeed sets *us* free, free from all those other sovereignties that seek our loyalty. Think for a moment about those sovereignties, those allegiances that have a claim on our lives. They are numerous. We may begin with the sovereignty of self. “Be yourself” is one mantra. “You must look out for your own self-interest,” is another. Rarely do we hear, “Be a self for others.” Then, there is the sovereignty of money. “Money makes the world go round.” “If only we had more money, there isn’t anything we couldn’t do.” Rarely do we want to hear the words of Jesus, “You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Then there is the sovereignty of political ideology, right and left. Political ideologies seek our allegiance, and it takes a free human being to stay clear of them. We adopt them hoping they will shape the world the way we want it shaped, but it does not work that way. For political ideologies are, in the end, blind – they see only what they want to see.

And yes, there are those earthly rulers that continually seek our allegiance. Unless they do rule in the fear of God and not just say that they

do, they can easily lead us astray, and again, it is only a free human being who can voice opposition. In our society, we safeguard this freedom to oppose, but, in reality, those who oppose the actions of a political leader, let us say a president of the United States, are often branded as unpatriotic.

Now, if we give our allegiance to Jesus and the God of Jesus as the sovereign of our lives, we will be set free from our ultimate allegiance to all those other sovereign powers that seek to shape us. Without that freedom, John would never have dared to write his Book of Revelation. Sister Theresa would never have been able to give her life for the sake of the poor. Sojourner Truth would never have sought her freedom, nor would Rosa Parks have refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Mahatma Gandhi would never have been able to practice his non-violence, nor would Martin Luther King Jr. or Cesar Chavez followed his example. And without these, our brothers and sisters, we would be far more impoverished than we are.

Each of them gave their allegiance to a truth or a sovereign power greater themselves, and that allegiance set them free.

May it be so also for us. May our allegiance to God and God's beloved son set us free from all those other claims upon our lives that cannot, in the end, give the life that we truly seek. So shall we be set free for faith and service, set free to be the human beings God has called us to be.

And, if this is the message we can glean from this "Reign of Christ" Sunday, then we cannot help but be grateful for those wise souls who suggested it in the first place. Thanks be to them, and to God.