

“King of Love”

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost; a rather mundane title for the day. It is also the last Sunday of the church year and next Sunday will be New Year’s Day (in the liturgical calendar). For some time there has been a Sunday called Christ the King, but the Church did not settle on a particular Sunday until recently when the last Sunday after Pentecost was chosen. Some call it Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday; while others feeling that the monarch terminology is dated call it the Kin-dom of Christ Sunday. This last one seems more than a little contrived to me.

Regardless of what we call this day, at first blush it seems rather odd that we mark the universal dominion of Jesus Christ with a passage describing the crucifixion. Those who developed the common lectionary¹ could certainly have picked a more majestic text to mark this day. Perhaps they could have picked a reading about the Resurrection, or the Ascension, the Transfiguration, a miracle, or something apocalyptic from the Book of Revelation. They could have selected a reading that pointed to Christ’s unique nature, his triumph over death and the grave, or his triumph over the forces of evil.

Instead we get a reading about the most tragic part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. For those outside of Christianity this is usually looked at as a failure. Indeed, the crucifixion is what St. Paul called, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” There is no obvious victory in the crucifixion. For those Jews who expected a messiah of triumphant power in the tradition of King Saul or King David, the crucifixion blocks their way from recognizing Jesus as the Christ. For Gentiles, gods don’t get themselves killed by the Roman government. Their gods were enshrined in temples or are more immediately present in the person of the emperor. Even for most Christians the Crucifixion is the saddest moment of the Jesus story. It is the Resurrection in which Jesus and God triumph.

Jesus dies on the cross because that is how the Romans killed people that were convicted of insurrection and plotting against the Roman Government. It was their way of enforcing the *Pax Romana*. But Paul did not see the crucifixion this way, nor did Jesus’ early followers. Their vision of the cross and crucifixion won out over the ignominy of the Roman punishment. Christ crucified is something that we preach, teach, and understand as not the low point of Christ’s ministry, but rather they gateway to his triumph. Christ dies in order that he may be raised again.

The Roman peace was not the idyllic peace of the Garden of Eden, where all creatures were at one. The *Pax Romana* was a peace that was imposed with a violent and cruel regime of power. Their power was the army, oppressive taxation, and coopting local petty despots and royal wannabes into enforcing their peace upon the poor, which was most everyone. The peace of Christ’s kingship is different from the *Pax Romana* in so many ways. It is not oppressive or forceful. It

¹ Consultation on Common Texts and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation.

emphasizes love over fear. It is about sacrifice for the other rather than imposing our will on others. It is about giving up our most precious possession, life, for our friends. As Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”²

Pontius Pilate wrote the inscription “King of the Jews” for placement above Jesus’ head on the cross. It was intended as ridicule, an indictment, and a threat. If you want to be the King of the Jews this is what that desire will get you. The power of Rome will put to death anyone who desires to be king. While crucifixion now seems to be passé, dictators still use brutality and the threat of it to impose their will. Keep in line or you will be killed.

What Pontius Pilate did not realize was that his contemptuous labeling of Jesus as King of the Jews turned out to be the coronation of a new type of king. This king’s power came not from armies, brutal laws and punishments, draining taxation, and fear. This kingship was to be a kingship of love, redemption, kindness, equality, and care for the poor, widowed, orphaned and oppressed. This new king is the King of Love. The new kingdom is not of Rome but of God and heaven. The Peace of God is more than the lack of war. Peace is a state of being where people lived free of fear not just of violence but also of want. As Jesus said, “I came that [all] may have life, and have it abundantly.”³

The power of kings and queens, dictators and despots, presidents and prime ministers, armies and navies, strength and cunning, and all that the world seems to admire and celebrate are not part of Jesus’ kingdom. Like prophets of the Hebrew Bible Jesus has come to turn swords into ploughshares⁴ that the land may feed all instead of the land feeding on the dead from battles. Also “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”.⁵

That is the Kingdom of God over which Christ the King is to reign. What’s more, as Jesus said, “That kingdom of God is at hand”⁶. Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is within you.”⁷ The kingdom of God is not something we have to wait for, it is something that is available to us at the very moment. All that is necessary is to grasp it, claim it, and live into it. Let Christ reign in your heart and the peace that passes all understanding will be yours. Then “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁸

² John 15:13 NRSV

³ John 10:10 NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 4:2, Joel 3:12, Micah 4:3

⁵ Isaiah 4:2 NRSV

⁶ Mark 1:15, Matthew 3:12, 4:17

⁷ Luke 17:21 NRSV

⁸ Romans 8:38-39 NRSV