

November 20, 2016

Reign of Christ

Luke 7: 15, 16, 18-23

Today has been traditionally known as **Christ the King** Sunday or the **Reign of Christ** Sunday. Now to understand what kind of King we are celebrating, we also have to understand what kind of Kingdom we are talking about.

One way of looking at **Jesus'** ministry is through the lens of enacted prophecy, what we might call prophetic street theatre today. **Jesus** travels around the countryside with his entourage of 12 disciples.

Why 12? He is mirroring the 12 tribes of Israel. He heals and cleanses, includes, teaches and forgives: All the while ignoring the rules and regulations of the religious authorities. In this manner, he acts out his idea, his image of what would happen *if God* were the high priest. **Jesus** challenges the religious authorities with healing outside the Temple and on the Sabbath. In our gospel lesson, he even touches a dead body in a funeral procession with amazing result. And words gets back to John the Baptist about a prophet being raised up among the people.

When John's disciples come to check him out, what does **Jesus** point to as signs of the Kingdom?

Not military power or political intrigue. Not symbols of wealth and high office. Rather **the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.** In other words, the common folk receive healing, restoration, new life and it is all good news.

Application for Today:

Jesus shows in word and deed that the Kingdom of **God** is not about the rich and powerful. Rather **God's Reign** meets our pressing human needs now. It brings blessing to the common people now, or it is nothing at all.

Let's sing #89 (More Voices) **Love is the Touch.**

Luke 23: 33-43

There is a new show on Netflix, called “**The Crown.**” Have any seen it?

It is a British production revealing the human politics behind the post war transition from King George VI to Queen Elizabeth II.

As young Elizabeth prepares for her new role her grandmother the Queen Mary explains that the crown is a religious vocation given directly by **God** to calm and steady the people through impartiality which lifts them up. She will be crowned by the Archbishop and the Church of England not the Prime Minister and the House of Commons. This is a modernized and sanitized version of the doctrine, Divine Right of Kings, or the Great Chain of Being of Shakespeare’s day.

It is obvious that Queen Elizabeth II took this belief and the pageantry of her coronation to heart as she has reigned faithfully in this manner for over 60 years. But as I watched these episodes this week, it got me juxtaposing **Jesus** with Elizabeth. What a difference in estate: **Jesus’** vocation representing **God** and Elizabeth’s vocation representing **God**. Peasant and monarch: Could their trappings and station in life be more different? Could their vocations possibly come from the same source?

Our second Gospel lesson reveals the deadly collision of **Jesus’** kind of Kingdom with the conventional Kingdoms of this world. It is further reflected in the differing responses of the two criminals crucified along with **Jesus**.

How does this confusion continually occur?

Well, **Jesus’** enacted prophecy, his street theatre rubs not only the religious authorities the wrong way but also the political authorities.

In the same acting out manner, he mocks the Roman rulers and King Herod, “**Render unto Caesar, what is Caesar’s (a graven image on a coin, nothing) and render unto God what is God’s (all creation, everything).**” He holds court with his disciples while with authority, pronouncing and claiming: “*If God was the*

king of Judaea, the debts of the poor would be forgiven. The first would be last and the last would be first.”

Jesus challenges the imperial authorities with satire, burlesque and caricature. The problem is, a generation or so later, the wit, the wink, the jest, the juxtaposition, the inside joke or play on words get lost. We end up taking it all so seriously, or too literally.

The ‘**as if king**’ becomes ‘**Is King**’. The ‘**as if Lord**’ becomes ‘**Lording it over**’. ‘**Faith with Jesus**’ becomes ‘**faith in Jesus**’.

And soon the Kingdom of **God** and the Church begin to look like, sound like, and feel like, the kingdoms and political institutions of the world. The Divine Right of Kings and the Great Chain of Being become Christendom.

Now, in today’s day and age with the benefit of history and hindsight, we are learning to no longer confuse the Reign of **Christ** with worldly monarchs or connect the Kingdom of **God** with present day empires. As you know, I use the language, **God**’s New Day or **God**’s Dream for Humanity, instead of the Kingdom of **God** to help us move forward.

However, there remains a part of us that still think the reign of **God** is a thing, a physical entity of some sort that must be established politically and legally in our midst like other kingdoms. We think; we expect the reign of **God** should be the full meal deal, the main course, the plate of food in the restaurant of life. And this can lead to the fanaticism we see today. We forget **Jesus** suggested it was enough to **just** be leaven in the loaf and spice on the food.

Let’s remember, **Jesus** didn’t form an army. **Jesus** didn’t start a political revolution. He didn’t even visit a local politician that we know of. **Jesus** didn’t live in a palace. He was executed by the very powers that he lampooned.

Thankfully, there is another part of us that realizes that the Reign of **God** is spiritual, relational and experiential. It is not an institution it’s an **event**.

We see it, hear it, and participate in it through compassion, mercy, generosity, forgiveness and justice. It happens heart to heart. It is intangible, fleeting and yet transformational. Its potential lies hidden in every moment, waiting to be realized in our actions. It can build up within us as we participate in it and practice it in the world.

Let's return to our first question: what kind of Kingdom?

The Kingdom of **God, God's New Day** is a spiritual, relational, experiential and transformational **event** that arises as a **counter weight**, another voice, to the cultural kingdoms of this world. It is not resistance against or opposition to, or contrariness in the face of. You can't be a cranky Christian be where it's at.

Rather, **God's New Day** comes into existence in our **re-imagining** a different world, **re-imagining** a different course of action than the way empires of this world work.

When we **re-imagine** the world with **Jesus** and then act on it, we create a new **event** that transforms our relationships and interactions. We cooperate with **God's Dream** and become *just* the spice that seasons the whole plate of food. We accept being the leaven, *just* the air bubbles that make the entire lump of dough rise. We are the rising spirit that lifts the whole world to a better place. Following this path, we change things without destroying things. The kingdoms of this world change by destroying. That is their nature. But **God's New Day** doesn't! This is the true litmus test: An **event** that *changes without destroying*.

Here is a short poem from 100 years ago that **re-imagines** it all, in my opinion. It is our *Application for Today*:

**“He drew a circle that shut me out.
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But Love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in!” Amen.**

Edwin Markham