

Christ the King Sunday, November 24, 2019
THE REIGN OF CHRIST

Rev. Patricia Weatherwax
Luke 23:33-43 NRSV

INTRODUCTION

From devotions at the most recent deacons' meeting, I learned about Edward Perronet (pair-o-net). He was the son of an Anglican priest, and worked closely with John Wesley and his brother Charles Wesley, in England's eighteenth century religious revival.

Perronet is perhaps most famous for penning the lyrics to the hymn, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name", which we started with this morning. The lyrics of our hymns are one way we learn theology during worship.

Shortly before he died, in Canterbury, England, Perronet uttered these last words: "Glory to God in the height of His divinity! Glory to God in the depth of his humanity! Glory to God in His all-sufficiency! Into His hands I commend my spirit." (end quote)

I think I will embroider that on my pillowcase so those can be my final words, someday, too. Hey, here's cottage industry for theology geeks.

With those few phrases Perronet expressed a whole truckload of theology- ways we think about, talk about, know about and experience God! The Trinity, divinity, authority, power, humanity and the incarnation. He professed faith in God's power to forgive, and to grant eternal life.

Donald M. McKim, current noteworthy Presbyterian theologian and writer reminds us "All our theology can only, at best, point to but never capture the ultimate mystery of God. .. God as mystery can never be contained in human words". (A Down and Dirty Guide to Theology, 2011 WJK, p 18.)

Spiritual mysteries, like the divinity **and** humanity of Jesus, are still above our understanding.

Dr. McKim describes our liturgical year, and this special Sunday, pointing out the importance of understanding that we can't fully understand! He explains:

"The liturgical year orients us to remember and relive God's on-going actions in history." ... Christ the King. The 'last Sunday' of the Christian year is the celebration of the reign of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:11-20; Rev 1: 4b-8). Theologically, this Sunday anticipates the fullness of the reign of God in Jesus Christ and the consummation of human history. It recognizes the present lordship of Christ, established in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the one whose reign is taking shape in the world today, The final fulfillment of the reign of Christ is anticipated in the Lord's Prayer with the petition 'Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). (McKim, *ibid*, p 53-56).

MANAGING POLARITIES

Part of the “kingdom coming” is accepting that, as much as we belong to God, and want God to reign, we are in the “not yet” fulfilled reign. I don’t think we have too much trouble accepting that. But how easy it is to slip into despair that maybe God isn’t working in our world, these days. It’s a mess.

A few years ago our presbytery was promoting a book study, about “Managing Polarities”. That’s a description of - our working with knowing there might be one right answer, but in reality there are a whole range of good answers. Generally people believe strongly that their opinions are correct, and then might assume that if they are right, others must be wrong, classic ‘either/or’ thinking.

A polarity is a pair of truths that need each other. Jesus is human; Jesus is divine. When both sides are right they need each other, to experience the whole truth. It is hard for humans to welcome *both/and* answers over *either/or* absolutes.

Jesus seemed to understand polarities. Many of his teachings highlighted life's contradictions. Even Jesus, being the Christ is a polarity, a both/and, not an either/or. Divine or human? Yes. “Lamb and shepherd, prince and slave, gift and cost.” (Hymn 274).

DIVINE REIGN

What does it mean to us, that Jesus is king? That we crown him “Lord of all”? Dr. McKim, in his explanation of why we recognize “the Reign of Christ Sunday”, cites two texts, Colossians 1:11-20 and Revelation 1: 4-8. Both are powerful statements of the authority of Jesus, the Christ, and what we gain from that relationship. Colossians 1:11-20, Paul writes:

We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created
and is supreme over all creation,
for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.

He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.
 Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body.
 He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead.

So he is first in everything.

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ,
 and through him God reconciled everything to himself.
 He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
 by means of Christ's blood on the cross. (wow)

And Revelation 1: 4-6 adds:

This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia.

Grace and peace to you from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit before his throne; and from Jesus Christ. He is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the world. All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.

There is tremendous power in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ, from earth to the throne room of God. Our logical response is extreme respect, awe and gratitude. "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11).

"The King of the Jews", that's what the sign over Jesus' crucified body read. At that time, the king the people knew best was Herod, evil and cruel, although I actually read about the *polarity* of his reign! The ancient kings of the Jews were a mixed bunch, but over and over the historical books of the Old Testament say: "the king did what was evil in the Lord's eyes". Jesus, instead is the King above all Kings, the Lord of all Lords.

HUMAN SUFFERING

And yet, we don't think of Jesus only as our triumphant king of kings. We know the reality of "God with us" meant Jesus suffered like us.

There are some presbyterian-type phrases we use around here: "Decently and in good order"? "If the way be clear"? Those are our preferences, but less likely to be our reality. Typically, things do not happen decently or even in the proper order. More often than not, the way is not clear. As Thomas Merton prayed:

"Lord, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end."

What are we saying when we say Jesus was fully human? Did Jesus know what to expect or was he indeed, fully human; clueless like we often are? Hebrews 4:14-15: "Since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin."

This is our King. One who was able to live this human life without sin, but not without pain or difficulty. “The Passion of the Christ” film (2004) known for its bloody violence was gruesome, but probably accurate. (deep breath)

One brief aside that I want to mention. When I was a kid we watched a lot of “cowboys and Indians”. Usually near the end the Cavalry would appear to save the day. I had a lot of trouble remembering if Jesus died on Calvary or Cavalry.

But now when we read the accounts, depending on our translation, the *place* of the crucifixion of Jesus and the two other men, could be called any number of things. We rarely hear Calvary, except in older hymns. This is one of those Biblegateway.com insights. Look up Luke 23, verse 33, in “all English translations”.

Depending on how the word gets translated, from what language, it’s what the text calls it. In Greek the place is called *cranion*, where we get our English word *cranium*, which are the skull bones. In Latin the word for your head is *calvarium*, and so it was translated Calvary. In Hebrew the word was *Golgotha*. The New Revised Standard Version uses “the skull”.

Google Images of “Skull Hill” show a rock wall that has eroded over time, but still has crags that resemble the holes of the skull bone. The name then, was whatever word people knew for head bones. It’s all the same place, not a green hill, far away, but a rocky grey place, holy for Christ followers.

Back to the suffering savior. We know from the gospels that Jesus often was in danger from those who opposed his teaching, over the course of his ministry. I can’t help but wonder if there was even more than we read about. John’s gospel (20:25) ends with this poignant reminder: “There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

WHY IT MATTERS

So we are pretty sure Jesus suffered terribly, even though he was God in human form. That’s significant for us, when we are having a hard time in our often dark world. Accepting that “life is hard, but God is good” is a polarity challenge. This world is often dark and has been called that forever, and will be until God’s reign is permanent.

Knowing there is an alternative, knowing that we have “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”, can help get us through the dark times.

There is hope, if we look for it, like in the Bible book called Acts, when murderous Saul becomes Paul, the great apostle and theologian. There is hope, when Augustine in the 400s, finds light and strength in an all-powerful God of grace, and influences Christian thought for all time. Today, there is hope because rap artist Kanye West’s newest album is entitled “Jesus is King” and is described as “an expression of the gospel”. God keeps sending people that are lighting candles instead of cursing the darkness.

Why **do** we think either/or? Constant victory rings hollow; uneased earthly pain takes away hope. A couple of days ago, God put me in the right place at the right time to celebrate a victory with a church member. There was an answered prayer, good news and great joy. It had to be a God-driven coincidence that I happened to be there, right then. And yet, my heart struggled. I had prayers not answered my way. Jesus did too, and he proclaimed: "Father, not my will but yours" (Luke 22:42). Jesus like us in every way, with earthly struggles, except without sin.

We are not monarchs, kings or queens, large and in charge, here. We are not reigning or ruling the world, God is. God's big picture, God trying to take our mistakes and yes, our sin, along with what others choose to do, and work it all for our good. That has to be incredibly difficult task. Let's leave it to God to reign in glory and sort out our messes and turn our mourning into dancing, and help us be victorious now or later, as God allows.

Can we, will you pray that timeless treasure from 1921?

King of my life I crown thee now
Thine shall the glory be
Lest I forget thy thorn-crowned brow
Lead me to Calvary.

Lest I forget Gethsemane
Lest I forget thine agony
Lest I forget thy love for me
Lead me to Calvary.

May I be willing, Lord, to bear
Daily my cross for Thee;
Even Thy cup of grief to share,
Thou hast borne all for me.

Lest I forget Gethsemane
Lest I forget thine agony
Lest I forget thy love for me
Lead me to Calvary.

Siblings, rejoice, the Lord is King. Amen