

Christ the KING! (?)

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Inspired by the recent publication of the 150th year Hope Church history book, I did some in-depth Hope Church research of my own this week: I searched meticulously through our electronic files to pour through the last 15 years of bulletins for this Sunday in the liturgical calendar. Which, of course, isn't very in-depth research – especially since all I did was look at the heading for each bulletin. But still, there may be an interesting historical nugget I've mined from my research for some future historian to take note of... Take a look at the heading in today's bulletin: 'Reign of Christ Sunday' – that's the title of this celebration in the church year, right? – well, for the past few years, yes. But go back to 2008, and you will see the heading: "Christ the King Sunday" – and that is the heading you will find year to year before that - except for a blip in 2004 when the heading is 'Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday' but then back to Christ the King in '05. Fascinating, right? – this is the sort of intriguing stuff that extensive research uncovers!

So what's going on here? Well, it's not too mysterious, right? – shifting from Christ the King to Reign of Christ does a couple of things – it moves away from both the masculine and the monarchy focus that KING expresses, with the thought that theology can already be quite dominated by and stuck in some masculine and hierarchical ruts. Now certainly, using 'Reign' of Christ doesn't entirely avoid those pitfalls, but at least it seems a step in the right direction. Or maybe not – along the way in my parish pastor years, I've heard quite often from respected colleagues and parishioners that the whole 'Christ the King/Reign of Christ' thing does not sit very well with them – even with a shift from 'King' to 'Reign'. The concepts of 'King' and 'kingdom', of 'Christ reigning' are either too foreign to our world or too misused in our world to have much resonance or traction for us today.

OK – I understand that – but today I want to see how it could be important to hold on to and affirm Christ the King and Reign of Christ as part of our observance and vocabulary. And I do so not to counter those critiques I've mentioned – I appreciate and resonate with and learn from and join with those voices. And trust me, I am fully aware how ironic and fraught it can be for an old white man, hallmark of hierarchy and privilege to say: let's emphasize Christ the KING! I may not be the best one to be making this argument, but it seems an important idea to play with on this Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday - to see what meaning these images can offer to us.

And it is the idea of playing with the language that seems the most interesting and promising to me. Words are such interesting things- the meanings we give to them; the different meanings people have for them; the changes in meaning for a word given a particular time or circumstance. I find theological words very interesting – and one of the things that challenges and intrigues me is to try to listen for and track what meanings we associate with theological words – things like sin and salvation; like grace and forgiveness – there are all sorts of layers in what people try to express and what they hear with such words. Take the term 'Evangelical' for instance – that's a word used so often over the past decades that it has taken on a particular meaning in American Christianity in particular, often for a kind of faith outlook that I do not find most helpful – so suddenly by the way the word is used, by many definitions, I am not an evangelical. Well wait! – I don't want to give up that word – and I'm not going to. Evangelical means someone committed to the good news of the gospel – and I want to have a say in what that commitment sounds like and looks like. So I say: "I AM an Evangelical, and I'd be glad to tell you what I think that means...!"

And the point of this mini evangelical tirade is to say that it's the same sort of idea that I want to bring to 'Christ the King/Reign of Christ' – that I don't want the use and misuse of it to keep us from receiving the life-giving meaning in it. Because really one of the fascinating things that I see in Scripture is a long pattern of emphasizing King as an image of power and authority, but doing so in a way that always leads to turning the meanings upside down.

And the prime example of that is King David. The reading from II Samuel concludes the life of David with his final words (even though his death isn't recorded until a few chapters later in the following book of I Kings). But this "last words" designation tells us to pay attention: and we're told David is the anointed and exalted one, the favorite of God – and David says he has ruled in God's ways and God has promised to prosper his descendants. And you'll hear echoes of that framing of who King David is throughout the Old Testament – David as the epitome of righteous ruling and David's throne as the focal point for God's promises and presence. The glory days of King David are the gold standard, and everyone wants to go back that golden glory. But that is not the only storyline we're told. From the very start, the idea of a king for Israel is seen as problematic – as a rejection of God as the true ruler and an invitation to power and conflict. And then in the life of David we're told of his moral and political failures – his abuses of persons and power. And as we track David's descendants, the guiding rule is conflict and corruption rather than covenant and blessing. The ideal of King, and even the ideal King David are critiqued all along the way as unable to live up to the good they promise.

But what develops from these 2 storylines in tension, is another idea – another promise: that a true king will come again – a truly anointed one, a Messiah – a king in the line of David, yes, another King David even, but actually better. This King will truly rule in righteousness and God will restore Israel to its glory. There is still the idea that if they can just get this king thing right, all will be well – so pray for the Messiah, the true David, to come.

And all of this is the setting for John 18! You might need a moment to shift and take that in – but really that's right, right? Pilate talking to Jesus in John 18 is a conversation all about kings – and for the Gospel writer and readers, it has everything to do with this whole context of Old Testament kings and David and Messiah. We can recognize all of the different layers of King dynamics going on here: there is Pilate – he represents the Roman Emperor, who is the embodiment of everything wrong in a king – putting a human in God's place to oppress others. Who Jesus is and what he says is certainly in conversation and contrast to that; but mainly Jesus' story is being told and judged in the context of the Messiah – the king to come – the promise for God to fulfill. Is Jesus the Messiah? – that has been the murmured question throughout his life and it comes to a crescendo in Jerusalem – will Israel be restored? Or is Jesus just a lunatic? An agitator? A fraud?

Is Jesus the Messiah? – the promised KING? And the definitive answer given in the story of John and in the arc of the church's story is YES! – YES! Jesus is the Messiah, the King – YES! YES...but... YES, but, who the Messiah is and what the Messiah is about are very different than what was expected. Jesus says: 'my kingdom is not of this world, and my followers do not fight for my power in this world...this is what my kingdom is about: the truth – and those who belong to the truth are part of my kingdom.' These are something like Jesus' own last words, and then Jesus goes to the cross. Everything about Jesus' king story is upside down.

So where does that lead us? Well. We go through the king story of David to the promise of the Messiah to the story of Jesus, and then we end up in Revelation, the consummation of promise and time and salvation, and we hear this: 'Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings – Jesus has made us to be a kingdom – glory and dominion to him!' And the crucial task for the church when we hear that – when we sing and proclaim that this day – Jesus is KING! – is to remember that whenever we hear it or say it, it is upside down. Being a king is all about power, and the story we

hold is that in Jesus Christ we see God using God's power FOR rather than against; the power to give rather than take; the power for life rather than death. This is the truth of who God is and how God is. And this is not some temporary strategy by God – truth is not temporary. The consummation in Revelation is of the upside King – and when he is ruler and glorified and judge and in dominion, it is with the power of for and giving and life – this is the power of eternity.

Which means it is our power now, too. Being a follower of Jesus Christ, being the church, is all about power – it is! – how we choose to use the truth we have for ourselves and others. And the church that proclaims Jesus Christ as KING, does so to remind, renew, repent, reimagine, how we can turn the power calculations of our lives and this world upside down. I know there is risk in ideas like King and reign – and the church knows well for itself those King David ways of promise falling far, far from the mark. But there is the risk too of making the ways of Christ simply a nice idea, or important suggestion. The scripture urgency of proclaiming Jesus as ruler, King, the one who reigns, the kingdom of God, is to proclaim the upside down truth that it IS love and self-giving and resurrection that reign – that are true power. The church's urgency of witnessing to Christ's reign is to open ourselves to the Spirit's call to those very truths defining who and how we are as followers of Christ the King. It is a truth and call that reaches deep into our lives - this witness to the King is a testimony to what power is and so it challenges how we use it in all our relationships: with our families – with our children, our partners, our parents - the power of for and giving and life; in our politics and policies and citizenship - the power of for and giving and life; in the life of our church, our denomination, with other faiths, in our conflicts and our aspirations - the power of for and giving and life.

Christ the KING – it is fraught – and I may not have convinced you. But rather than give the word away, it could be a way to tune our ears and train our eyes for what we hear and see about our God and our lives – the truth of a kingdom that is about the power of for and giving and life. When Revelation proclaims Jesus ruler, it also calls him the faithful witness – 'I have come to testify to the truth' Jesus says' – the truth in his life, death and resurrection. It is with that truth at work in us, at work through the Spirit of Christ in this world, that the power, the reign of God is revealed and the power of this world is turned upside down. And so our Evangelical prayer is this: 'come King Jesus, and reign in us with the power of for and giving and life.' Amen.