

The Reign of Christ

The language we use in church matters. A few years ago, we shifted from calling this particular Sunday *Christ the King Sunday* to *The Reign of Christ*. I'm not sure the language shift really helps us understand anything any better, though. We don't know the first thing about what it means to come totally under the rule of another. Our political context renders the liturgical significance of this Sunday almost entirely irrelevant. It just doesn't have the same kick to say "Christ the Government," although that probably captures most closely what the early church would have meant when they uttered the phrase.

So, why don't we take a closer look at our language?

Let's look first at what the Bible means by the word *reign* or *kingship*, then at how the early church would have understood it, and finally how we might understand it now. Then, let's take another look at this business of the *reign of Christ*.

To start from a biblical perspective is look at kingship; specifically, to look at King David. David's reign represents for Israel the high-water mark of its influence and power. David is like the George Washington of Israel. Nobody did it better than David, and his deeds are well-chronicled. But in spite of all these achievements, it is David's *faithfulness* to God that comes up again and again.

And yet, he made terrible errors in judgment. He had an extramarital affair with the wife of one his generals and then made sure her husband was killed in battle.

God held David accountable, and yet, despite his failures, God calls him *a man after God's own heart*, and makes an everlasting covenant with him. It comes up every year this season. It is the promise that a descendent from the house of David will forever sit on the throne of Israel.

But it all falls apart after that. The kingdom is divided. It is weakened, and ultimately it is conquered. Then, the people of God are dragged off into slavery. In their exile, it is Jerusalem they mourn, and the reign of David that they recall.

A few centuries pass, the fortunes of God's people rise and fall, but mostly fall. A pining for a messiah emerges. That brings us to our next snapshot of what it means to be king, to reign... a good king would be a messiah in the Old Testament sense, in the mode of David.

By the time of Jesus, they just want someone who can make Rome go away. God's anointed would be anyone who could pull that off.

Religious zealots preached that the Jews were losing their pure national identity with the Roman occupation. They began to look again for a *messiah*, one who would lead them out of suffering and restore them to the prestige, power and security they had enjoyed under the mythical King David. Local *messiahs*, which simply means *anointed*, galvanized small groups of people and led tiny little revolts, usually quickly put down by the dominating Romans.

That least us to the early Christian understanding of what it means to reign. After the diaspora of the Jews, when Christianity began to take its identity and become more than a sect of Judaism, there was the radical claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. This is a claim that is radical not so much because of its flaunting of the scientific convention that dead people don't get up and come back to life, but because it flaunted the *political* convention that Rome controlled who lived and died. In the celebration of the Eucharistic feast, the early Church said, "No, Rome, you do not control *ultimately* whether we live or die. For your control is only finite. God's control is eternal and it is to God whom we give our trust."

But then our understanding of *reigning* turns yet again

When Christianity became the state religion of Rome, our first example of the blurring of the lines between church and state, everything changed. The private faith of the persecuted Christians became suddenly the public faith of the emperor. Ever the consummate politician, the Roman emperor Constantine used the church to stabilize his government. Religious ritual became state celebration. That's when processions started to happen in churches, mirroring the triumphal entry of victorious troops. That's when the church began to inhabit basilicas and bishops began to wear robes that made them look like kings. Then we move into the middle ages and the Roman Empire's military might began to decline, and the Emperors again used the church to prop up the sagging empire, and it became the *Holy* Roman Empire.

We don't come to a concept like *reigning* or *kindship* without importing our own baggage - and apparently three or four thousand years of baggage along with us.

The truth is, at times I think the church is a little glib about the reign of God. It sounds good, but we aren't sure we know what we mean by it.

The apostle Paul could give us guidance. He probably thought a lot about the reign of Christ with all he endured for the sake of the Gospel. Beatings, Shipwrecks, snakebites, arrests, imprisonments - that's a partial list. Paul defined what it meant to suffer in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the face of all his sufferings, Paul wrote the hymn to Christ that we received from Colossians. He makes, in the face of his imprisonment, the bold claim that Jesus Christ alone is Lord: he is the image of God, he is the firstborn of all creation, in him all things are created, things visible and invisible. Jesus Christ is the head of the body and the church. Jesus Christ is king...but what kind of a king is he?

Paul tells us that he is the king through whom God Almighty has reconciled all things to God, making peace out of violence, bringing redemption even out of an execution on the cross.

Christ does reign, but not in the way we expect. We get a little glib at times and I wonder if we've said it so much that we've lost the importance of it, but Christ is a crucified king. God's own anointed, nailed to a tree.

Messiahs don't get nailed to trees; that's like Messiah 101. In the Old Testament, if the anointing of God passed from God's chosen leader, like from Saul to David for example, bad things happened to the one from whom God's anointing departed. A crucified messiah is an

oxymoron. No wonder Paul said it was foolishness to the gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews.

But in Jesus Christ, we see a messiah willing to suffer on behalf of those whom he rules.

In the most basic Biblical understanding, the king is the one who is responsible to God for the wellbeing of the subjects. The good king cares for and seeks the best for those he rules. It is in this sense that Jesus Christ is the perfect king because his reign is about redemption.

Jesus Christ reigns because he reigns *God's way*.

We can take comfort that this ruler knows our suffering, having suffered alongside us and for us and for us.

We can take comfort that this king knows our fears, having been afraid himself.

We can take comfort that the one who reigns over us knows our loves, having loved and been loved himself.

Because it is Jesus Christ who reigns, we are not bound, but rather freed from fear, freed from anxiety, freed to love.

Yes, our language matters. The words we use matter. But the purpose of the church is not primarily to parse the meaning of words. Our purpose, if we indeed believe that Christ reigns, is to *show* that reality.

If Christ indeed reigns, where's the evidence? Where's the proof of his reign?

I'd say it's here. Not this structure, but this *body* of which Christ is the head. That's the evidence that Christ reigns. That looks very different from evidence of other governance. Because Christ reigns, we share one another's joys and bear one another's burdens. Did you know this church bears your burdens? Did you know that this church shares your joys? We do it because Christ is our ruler, and no one else. Here, Christ reigns and that's what makes this a church and not a civic organization. It's why I can say that the minute we say we are a church, we have expressed a fully articulated mission.

Christ reigns and that is why we keep coming back here in order that we might be the witnesses - the *evidence* to the world of these things.

My friend Nora Tubbs Tisdale, now retired from Yale, tells a couple of stories that illustrate what it is we proclaim when we say Christ reigns over all.

In a sermon she preached in church I served early in my ministry, Nora told the story of a woman named Pam, who was a member of her husband's congregation in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. Pam's husband died leaving her with young children just a few days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Nora said it surprised her to look up into the choir loft and see there among the choir members, Pam, singing her heart out. At the coffee hour Nora came up behind her and put her arm around her and said how glad, but how surprised she was to see Pam singing. And Pam responded, "I had to sing. I couldn't not sing. Not this year."

I think maybe that's evidence of the reign of Christ. What do you think?

Nora tells another story about a classmate of mine, Esther Widiasih. Esther was a visiting student from Indonesia when I was in seminary and she is a gifted musician. Nora ran into her at a conference on worship in the two thirds world that was being held in Geneva. When they went for coffee at a café, Esther proceeded to tell Nora about a Christmas Day in Jakarta, where Churches were being bombed and Christians are required to identify themselves with id cards. Word went out among the Christians in Jakarta that they should not try to go to church on Christmas Day. But Esther said, "I had to go to church. I had a choir to lead. And, Dr. Tisdale, I can't tell you how good it was to gather in worship.

I think maybe that's evidence of the reign of Christ. What do you think?

In a broken world where we know that drug wars will continue to displace refugees, where so far we have made little or no progress as a society addressing the problems of gun violence, where hunger and food insecurity still gnaw at young bellies, in a world where cancer still ravages the body and addictions still ravage the mind, in a world where brokenness can seem the order of the day, the good news of the Gospel comes through as calling: our God reigns, and Christ is king.

And I'm sure when we say all of that, someone is going to want some *evidence*.

I guess we'll have to provide it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.