

Reign of Christ C
Luke 23:33-43
November 20, 2022

“Christus Rex”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left . . . There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews’ . . . One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

I have to be honest. I thought long and hard about ignoring the appointed texts for today in favor of something less jarring as we begin Thanksgiving week and the start of the holiday season. I’m looking forward to roasted turkey, fresh cranberry sauce, pecan pie, and mother’s homemade noodles; to seeing my cousins for the first time in months; to hugging my niece and nephew. I’m looking forward to the start of Advent next Sunday and a new liturgical year; to hanging fresh greenery on the front porch; and the smell of anise and orange that comes with baking my family’s Christmas cookies. This text smacks of bitter, cruel reality and jerks us out of our wistful longing and careful planning and right back into the present—the often harsh here and now.

“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus.” This final Sunday of the church year provides no glimpse into the wonder and mystery of the season just around the corner. Instead, it pulls us backward to the gore and grief of Holy Week to remember one last time the fate of the one whose weeks-long birthday celebration is nearly upon us.

“There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’” That was the charge—sedition against the emperor. Jesus preached heaven’s realm, God’s kingdom, over and against Caesar’s and it landed him on a cross. What are we to make of the strange observance of Christ the King Sunday, of Reign of Christ Sunday? This is no Palm Sunday Triumphal entry, no Resurrection Day proclamation. This is the last day of the church year and it’s the only Sunday that we find King Jesus on a cross. It stings a bit of irony and it’s not what we expect today to be about.

There’s little question that Pope Pius the XI was not being ironic when he instituted the Feast of Christ the King back in 1925. As secularist and ultra-nationalist sympathies raged in Italy, Pius reminded the faithful that it was Christ, not Victor Emmanuel III, who was their true king. And perhaps, that was itself the greatest irony of all. We’re still talking about Jesus of Nazareth: the man who walked miles over dusty ground in sandals, who stood shoulder to shoulder with sweaty and dirty crowds teaching and ministering to their sick, who wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples’ feet, who openly socialized with “undesirables” and shunned the powerful and privileged, who openly challenged ruling elites and imperial priorities. Jesus was nothing like a king. What does it mean for us to call Jesus a king on this Reign of Christ Sunday?

For some, particularly for Americans, the idea of calling anyone a king is a bit of a stretch. While we’re historically infatuated with the lives of

monarchs and their families, we prefer to watch from a distance. We enjoy observing them, but we don't want one of our own.

For others, though, the Apostle Paul's language from the letter to the Colossians will seem fitting for Christ the King. Paul writes:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

That's a lot, isn't it? So much triumphalism. So much glory. I can scarcely recognize the man. What does it mean for me to call Jesus a king on this Reign of Christ Sunday? Perhaps that's a question I can tackle.

For me to call Jesus a king, I have to deconstruct everything that convention tells me about power and authority, nobility and privilege, reign and dominion. For me to call Jesus a king, I have to admit the power of peace, the authority of conscience, the nobility of self-sacrifice, the privilege of service, the reign of mutuality, and the dominion of love. For me to call Jesus a king, I have to lay aside all the triumphalism and glory of Paul's heavenly description of Christ, in favor of a humble, compassionate, wise, articulate, vulnerable, and all-too-human Jesus.

If Jesus is a king, then all the trappings of empire, hierarchy, and patriarchy must not be kingly. If Jesus is a king, then the imbalanced

scales of justice that tip to favor wealthy people, powerful people, connected people, people who look like me and live like me and pray like me, then those very scales must not be kingly. If Jesus is a king, then criminal justice systems and banking systems and institutions that keep people bound to unjust laws, biased lending practices, and mindsets of exceptionalism must not be kingly. If Jesus is a king, then ruling looks like serving and liberating and elevating and loving others, even when the cost of doing so is personal.

As I admitted last year on Reign of Christ Sunday, I'm not too comfortable with all this king-language for Jesus. It just doesn't seem to fit. But, if we're going to elect someone king, even for a day, a humble, compassionate, wise, articulate, and vulnerable guy like Jesus who served, liberated, elevated, and loved others, even when it cost him, isn't a bad choice.

But, I don't really think that Reign of Christ Sunday is so much about what we call Jesus—king, lord, Christ, teacher, prophet, guy—it's not really about what we call him. It's about what he calls for from those who choose to follow him. It's about those unconventionally kingly values of his like peace, conscience, self-sacrifice, service, mutuality, and love that we elevate when and if we call Jesus "King". It's about making those values our own, taking them deep into ourselves, and embodying them as we seek to undo the damage of empire, hierarchy, patriarchy, classism, sexism, racism, and injustice of all kinds. Because if Jesus is king, those things have no place in the kingdom.

Amen.