

Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 20 November 2022, Reign of Christ

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Sermon starts: 19:35

Readings: Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW-LUklI7vw>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

So this last Sunday of the Christian year is called now the Reign of Christ. The year began, of course, last Advent, when we celebrated our expectation of the return of Christ. That's what Advent refers to, by the way, not to the birth of the baby Jesus but to the return of the crucified and risen Jesus. Advent asks the question, who is this Lord who is returning? The rest of the Christian year tells us, beginning with the Christmas story, the Incarnation, the revealing of the true identity of this little baby by those foreign seers who arrived at Epiphany; and the stories of Jesus’ baptism and temptation and his clashes with authority, leading up to the suffering and death and resurrection that we celebrate through Holy Week and Easter. The story of Jesus’ earthly journey finally concludes with his Ascension when the disciples stood around and saw him rise to be reunited with the majesty of the Creator and source of all. And after we celebrated the birth of the Church with Pentecost, well, we went on in what's called Ordinary time, contemplating Jesus’ ministry’ his teachings’ his miracles - until finally we come to this Sunday,

which offers the final answer to the question of Advent: who is this Lord who is returning?

And the answer is: it's the sovereign ruler of all, king of the universe, lord over all the created universe, the earth, its creatures and all its people. In some traditions this Sunday is called Christ the King, and as we heard with Shannon, the word king now holds some connotations around power and privilege and military might,t and even some colonialism, in our history, so we've leaned away from that to say the reign of Christ: God rules over all.

And our readings today lay the groundwork for that transition from Christ the imperial king to Jesus the Good Shepherd, reigning over all. If we'd heard today's reading from Jeremiah, we would have heard the promise of a new kind of ruler, one who would rule in righteousness. We would have heard that this king is expected to be less like a monarch and more like a shepherd. Jeremiah talks about how poor shepherding on the part of the leaders of Israel has led the people to being scattered politically, geographically, and spiritually, and he promises a new set of shepherds. He talks of a righteous branch from the line of David, who is known as the shepherd king, and the reign of this new leader is going to be marked not with power and violence, but with wisdom and justice and forgiveness. And that word “justice” in the Hebrew scriptures always means putting to rights all that is unfair for those who are downtrodden or marginalized or persecuted. So our sovereign's governance sets a high priority on responding to the needs of those who have been wounded, those have been robbed and left by the wayside, those who have lost their way. The one who reigns over our lives is the one who sides with the poor and the downtrodden, not with the privileged and powerful of the land - certainly not with the ruling powers of the world. And we learned from the Gospel reading this morning that we would not be the first to misunderstand the kingship that Jesus showed us. Consider those who were there on the day of his crucifixion: their assumption was that a king is capable of doing whatever he wants, a king has complete control over his situation. If he's the king of the Jews, he could arrange to have himself saved. “If you are the king,” says this thief, “Save yourself and us.” The Christian who wants to be part of a

kingdom which controls all the outcomes of life, especially the political and economic and military outcomes, is missing the true nature of the reign of Christ.

This is the problem with any religious movement in any religion and society which would choose to support a certain secular king or power, hoping that support will then translate into control of their circumstances. It leads to religious extremism, criminal violence, and war. Jesus, a most unkingly king, was taken to the cross for his refusal to compromise the love of God for all people. His rule is from a throne of goodness, righteousness, justice, love, and vulnerability. Hs rule is not based on having the biggest and best equipped military or the loudest and most loyal crowd of supporters. With all due respect, I have to say, in my opinion, the right-wing evangelical body of Christians aligning itself with Mr Trump has a lot to answer for.

However, if we listen to the beginning of Paul's letter to the Colossians, we find out there is no mistaking the very great power and divinity that belongs to Jesus: he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things and 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. This Jesus who reigns in the lives of the baptized is the source of all power, the creator of all other powers, but the nature of his power is always

the power for the well-being, the saving, the making whole of others. Through him, writes Paul, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood on the cross. And the practical exercise of his power is always based in love, equal and unearned love for all of God's children. The penitent thief grasped that when he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” He is saying that here was a monarch whose reign did not deal death to his subjects but life, life even in the face of physical death. Those who choose to be subjects of this reigning monarch choose one who has the most valuable power of all: power over death itself. And thus Paul can say to the Colossians, who knew suffering and persecution, “May you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”

Jesus isn't just King - he's an ancestor, first born of all creation, a parent from

whom we receive an inheritance of immeasurable value. Those who choose to be subjects of this reigning monarch are choosing what side they will be on

in matters of righteousness and justice. Those who choose to be subjects of this

reigning monarch will let go of the worldly style of power, which includes revenge against those who wrong us, reward for those who please us, punishment for those who displease us, and defensiveness against all critique and criticism and loss of privilege. The subjects of Christ will choose the way of selfless love for

all, the ways of patience, the ways of compassion and generosity and kindness.

So how do we choose to be subjects of this reigning monarch called Jesus? The first step always has to do with our hearts, our own wills. We're asked in our baptismal covenant, “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your saviour?” Please don't be offended if I remind you that baptism is not a family tradition to be arranged while the christening robe still fits, nor is it a guarantee against the fires of hell. Baptism is the spiritual and communal expression of our choice of Christ as the one who reigns over our life. We choose to be part of the reign of

Christ by choosing daily a value system based on love for people - not because any of them have earned our love, any more than any of us have earned God's love, but love extended to our neighbors as ourselves, because that is what Jesus does, and therefore what his subjects do.

One final conclusion: if it is the love of Jesus that is to reign over all things, where is that reign going to be lived out and eventually visible to all? Well, it won't be just inside these four walls, will it - it'll be out there in our communities

where we live and travel and work and play, where we visit, where we take the

bus and walk the beach trails, where the people and the creatures in

the world of God's creation are found. This church, like so many churches, is a

beautiful and convenient place for us to meet, to remind ourselves of whose

subjects we are and what our work is, but the reign of Christ is an arrangement of Love intended for the world outside these walls. Amen.