

“Of Kingdoms and the King”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 24th 2019 (Reign of Christ Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Luke 23: 33-43

And so we have arrived...have arrived at the final Sunday in the Church’s calendar. Reign of Christ Sunday...as it has come to be known in our precincts of the Church. Christ the King Sunday as once we named it...and as it still is named in Roman Catholic circles. And it is...for a number of reasons...a complex and a fascinating Sunday. Fascinating...in part...because it is a relatively **recent** feast-day: less than 100 years old when Pope Pius XI instituted it for Catholics, instructing them to celebrate it on the final Sunday of October. That was only changed in 1969, when Pope Paul VI moved it to the final Sunday in the Church’s calendar: falling either on the final Sunday of November...or the next to last Sunday in November. Only subsequent to that did Protestant Churches—such as the United Church of Canada—begin to pick up on the celebration, as part of the ecumenical wave that helped to create the Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre. But I digress!

For what it’s worth, I am of the opinion that the move from end October to end November was the correct one, giving Reign of Christ Sunday an ideal location, at the end of one church-year and in anticipation of the start to a new church-year. After all: given that the Church year traces Christ from birth through death through resurrection and ascension, it’s only right that we take the final step at the very end, with his crowning as Lord of all creation. (As a matter of fact, when Paul VI moved the feast to the end of November, he also gave it a new official title: Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ **King of the Universe!**). A fitting climax indeed to all that has gone before it! On the other hand, given that we then enter into Advent—as we will do next Sunday—by inviting Christ to return to bring justice and healing to creation (thus the ancient Advent prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus, come”), what better prelude to that Sunday could there be, than a Sunday when we celebrate the Kingship of Christ, the Reign of Christ....and not merely in our little corner of the planet, and not merely on our particular planet, but—as Paul VI put it—as King of the Universe! Heady stuff, is it not? And—of course—for a church such as ours, a Sunday that cannot help but raise awkward questions in the year of our Lord, 2019!

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Those questions, in part, have to do with the impossible-to-disguise other-worldliness of this particular Sunday. That may sound like a strange note to sound in a Church whose calendar boasts such red-letter days as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Nevertheless: there are secular ways—**this worldly ways**—of interpreting each of those feasts: emphasizing the birth of a precious and vulnerable child at Christmas, emphasizing the rebirth of hope that buoyed the first-disciples at Easter, and emphasizing the winds of renewal and change that swept through (and continue to

sweep through) Christ's Church. And yes: if that approach is possible at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, it is even simpler to navigate one's way through the rest of the Church year, emphasizing Christ's practical teachings and their relevance to the lives we lead and the world in which we live. None of that...none of that forces an unwelcome otherworldliness from those who wish to plant their own feet—and the feet of their congregation—solidly on *terra firma*: seeking to avoid the accusation that they are “so heavenly minded...that they are no earthly good.”

And it is important, I think...important to be cognizant of that dimension of our heritage as Mainline Protestants...and to think twice before we are in too much of a hurry to disown that dimension of our heritage. Indeed: it is rare to meet a United Church Minister who would be aptly described as “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good,” although having met me you might be tempted to submit that you have finally managed to meet one! But seriously. We are a denomination—and we are part of a 500 year history of Protestant witness and work—that takes very seriously the call to practical discipleship in the midst of a hurting world. We don't always get it right: that much we surely have no choice but to acknowledge. But the fact that we sometimes create missions and ministries that have done far less good than they were intended to accomplish—and in some instances far more harm than anyone would have imagined possible—does not change the fact that we know in our bones that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news not for some other world, but for this world. I have no doubt but that the engaged, practical stance of the mainline Protestant world was a huge factor in attracting me—at the end of the day—to the United Church of Canada. Nevertheless!

It is pretty hard entirely to duck the “other-worldly” dimension of Christian faith—the “other-worldly” dimension of the Gospel—on this particular Sunday. Consider, for instance, the three Gospel lessons appointed for this Sunday as part of the three-year lectionary cycle used by so many churches, including ours. In Year A, the Gospel comes from Matthew; specifically, the Parable of the Last Judgment, in which we are told of a time when the Son of Man—seated on his magnificent throne—will divide the sheep from the goats. Whatever else we might wish to say of that parable, surely we have no choice but to acknowledge that it invites us to anticipate a judgment which—though grounded upon our actions (and our failures to act) within this world—will be rendered in the midst of a world with which none of us are yet familiar. In Year B, the Gospel comes from John: Christ's encounter with Pilate, in which Pilate explicitly asks him: “Are you a King?” to which Jesus responds by saying: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Couldn't be clearer, right? As for Year C—the Year drawing to a close with this morning's worship—the reading comes from Luke: incorporating that moment in which the sign is hung over Jesus naming him as “King of the Jews”, but also a moment in which the dying Christ (nearing his final breath) promises one of the thieves crucified next to him, that this dying man—that very day—will be with Christ in paradise. Surely...surely there can be no skirting the other-worldliness of that response: a response which by no means undermines the “this-worldliness” of the Gospel...

...the “this worldliness” which challenges us to live rightly not in some far off distant future but in the here and now!...

....but a response which most certainly comes from the perspective of a Christ whose “this-worldliness” is grounded in his awareness that there is more to “this world” than meets the naked eye.

And I rehearse all of that...I rehearse all of that because I think it is important—at a time when leading voices in our denomination—are questioning whether we might be able to jettison our “otherworldliness” without jettisoning our essential identity as a Christian people. I am thinking, of course, of Gretta Vosper, whose provocative book is titled, “With or without God”. But I am also thinking of the very many United Church folk who have responded favorably to Gretta and have thanked her for saying things they, themselves, have been thinking for a long time. In truth: that’s a turn I personally cannot take. As I think I have mentioned on more than one occasion: I would be happy to have the 19th verse from the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians plastered on my tombstone: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

At any rate: I don’t wish to belabor the point. But I do think it worth noting that some of what may make this an uncomfortable day for at least some of us, is that it directs our attention rather pointedly, to a dimension of the Gospel....

...to a dimension of the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ...

...that ranges far beyond the life of this world. And yes: my hunch is that the ultimate resolution of that uncomfortable question will go a long way toward defining the kind of future the United Church of Canada will have. But, I hasten to add, that is far from the only thing about Reign of Christ Sunday that may make it an uncomfortable Sunday for many of us.

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In truth. In truth, for me, as an unabashed “other-worldly” sort of guy, there is another dimension to Reign of Christ Sunday that makes me squirm ever so slightly. Indeed, in truth—since I am trying to be truthful here—a dimension which makes me squirm more than a little slightly. Delighted as I may be to receive this day’s reminder that Christ is not merely on the side of the Christian tribe...delighted as I may be to receive an annual invitation to celebrate the “cosmic Christ”...the fact is: the other side of that “cosmic” coin is the perceived arrogance others, outside the fold, may well find in the claim that Christ is Lord of Lords and King of Kings! Never mind a claim that sounds “other-worldly”! From where I stand, the real challenge on Christ the King Sunday—where the rubber hits the road—is parsing what it means to claim that kind of authority for the “founder” of our faith-tradition, in the midst of a world in which there are many faith-traditions: all of them seeking to speak an authoritative word about the world in which we live, and often doing so with goodness, beauty and truth. And yes: all of them—including our Christian faith-tradition—carrying some baggage as a result of those times when faith-traditions have collided and still collide at the point of a bayonet.

And the bottom line is that the image of “King”...the image of the “Sovereign”...and yes, the celebration of one who “reigns” is an image and a celebration that are, at bottom, inescapably “political”. Furthermore—like it or not...given the political nature of such language—it is impossible to duck the awkward fact that speaking of Christ as “King” (rather than, say, as prophet or as priest) conjures up an image of a sword-bearing Christ: a Christ who, as an essentially political actor, is entitled to wield force, much as all politics—ultimately—derives its legitimacy from either the explicit or implicit threat of force. (Try not paying your taxes for a couple of years and you’ll find that out rather quickly!) Nor does the fact that this is an “otherworldly” Kingdom of which we here speak, alter the fact that what is implicitly being suggested here is the very real possibility that the Christ we will encounter in the life of the world to come, wields the equivalent of the sword in that realm which an earthly King wields in this realm. The unease that causes for me has nothing to do with my questioning God’s right to reign in that way; God will be who God will be...with no presumed need to consult me for advice as to how the realm ought to be managed. I know that. My issue doesn’t rest there; it’s to be found elsewhere. In fact...it may most readily be found in that strange choice of scripture...that strange choice of a reading from Luke, a reading meant to adorn our worship on this particular Sunday every third year.

Consider! Consider that if one of you had wandered into the sanctuary a wee bit late this morning...had you, in fact, stumbled in just as David began reading the Gospel...you might have worried that you had—in Rip Van Winkle fashion—slept for 5 months, managing to arrive in Church either on Passion Sunday or on Good Friday. After all! That’s when we expect to hear readings from the Passion Narratives...readings that show us Christ on the Cross. Readings that fit the occasion perfectly, as Lent draws to a close in late March or early April....not on a late November Sunday when Christmas decorations are already popping up in the Malls and on many of our lawns. But isn’t that the point. Isn’t the point found precisely here: with the reminder that it is in the Passion Narrative—not only in Luke but in Mark, Matthew and John...

...in the four Passion Narratives that Christ is finally crowned as King. Precisely at his weakest, his most vulnerable, his most helpless. Crowned: at that moment in which—having been named King of the Jews—he offers the simple prayer: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Crowned: at that moment in which he offers a repentant thief the possibility of paradise regained. And yes: crowned as he struggles for his next breath...as he struggles to remain awake and alert...as he struggles not to give in to despair. And surely...surely whatever else this moment in time tells us...it tells us that the only sword this King wishes to wield is the sword that pierced the heart of that repentant thief as he reviewed his life, and saw with unshakeable clarity in the presence of Christ his need for mercy, his need for grace.

And my fear you see...my fear is that all too often we treat the Cross as a mere blip in Christ’s self-determination. My fear is that all too often we regard it as just one episode to be ranged side by side with all of the other episodes from the Gospel accounts....permitting us, then, to presume that this Jesus, once set free from the Cross, is then free to flex his muscles, to pick up his sword (and any other weapon he

might fancy), and put his enemies in their place. But the Cross, you see, is not merely “an” episode in the life of the redeemer; it is the **defining** episode: the moment we fixate on not because we Christians are terrible sadists who enjoy watching a man hanging from a Cross...but because it is here that we best catch a glimpse of God’s humanity...a glimpse of God’s vulnerability...and yes, a glimpse of the unending patience with which God waits for our return: luring us home not with the power of the sword...but with the power of love.

And yes, the great and grave and serious challenge for us as disciples...as communities of disciples...

...the great challenge for us **as the Church!**...

...is to embody that same quality of patient love. Love—not just any old love but precisely the love made known through Jesus—must always be our first and last word: especially in our encounters with “the other”...those not members of our fold. Of course, there will be times when we will need to speak other words: as Christ spoke other words. Denouncing cruelty and injustice. Holding to account those who perpetuate ancient wrongs as well as those who create new wrongs. In short: donning the prophetic mantle when it needs to be donned! That is surely part of our identity. But none of it...none of it can ever be permitted to be our final word...which must always be the word heard from the Cross. A word of forgiveness offered even to the worst of tormentors. And a word of new possibility and new beginning, offered to all who seek to start over. Nothing less than Christ’s own love: a love that watches and waits...invites...invites over and over again...a love that never gives up...a love that always keeps the lights on...and the door unlocked.

Oh...that we ourselves might truly come to know the full depth of that love!
Oh...that we, in turn, might come to offer it freely...and lavishly...and unhesitatingly...in the name of Jesus.

May it be so. Thanks be to God.