

sermon-11/21/10 Newport Pres. Church
“We’re Not in Kansas Anymore”
Col. 1:11-20

One commentator I consulted this week said this Sunday is a kind of New Year’s Eve. Next Sunday we start a new liturgical year when Advent begins. This, then, is the last Sunday of the year.

It is very appropriate to end the year with Christ the King Sunday. I realize that title is problematic for some in the Church. It sounds a bit strange to our modern American ears. We don’t have kings in this country. The only modern kings we know reside in the Mid-East or in England.

It can also sound a bit patriarchal. The Church has used far too much masculine language for God down through the years making many think of God as male. When you add Christ the King Sunday to this history it feels like adding insult to injury to many who already feel excluded.

In spite of all that, I find this Sunday to be incredibly meaningful and important. The whole liturgical year builds to this affirmation: Christ is King, not Caesar; Christ is King, not our secular culture; Christ is King, not our elected officials.

This affirmation reminds us this Sunday has not only religious importance, it also has political implications. Our gospel lesson makes that clear. We read about Jesus’ crucifixion. Over his head was put a sign, “This is the King of the Jews.” It was meant to be sarcastic. It ridiculed Jesus. But it also showed why they crucified him. That is what was done to political criminals who challenged the rule of Caesar. Jesus died as a political enemy of the state.

Will Willimon mentioned in his commentary on this passage that “The Feast of Christ the King was created in the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-20th century.” It was meant to counter the many totalitarian governments in the world at that time. Those governments seemed to dominate world affairs, but the Church said they were not ultimately in control. Christ ruled. Willimon concludes, “This day is a very ‘political’ Sunday.”

When we declare that Christ is King, we are affirming that we march to the beat of a different drummer. We are not in Kansas anymore. We are citizens of Christ’s kingdom. This is especially apparent as we prepare for Christmas. The culture says the Christmas season begins at Halloween! I bet you have already heard Christmas carols on the radio and in the stores. Some have already put up their outside Christmas lights.

Christians who take Christ the King seriously say we can’t get to Christmas until we go through Advent. Advent starts next Sunday, not on November 1st. It is a season of preparation. We prepare for Christ to come yet again into our lives and hearts. We prepare for Christ to be born in us in other words.

Advent is a time of longing for the light of Christ. This longing becomes wonderfully bitter/sweet if we don’t cut it short by jumping to Christmas too soon. First we need to feel the pain of the darkness that is so apparent all around the world. We need to experience the darkness in our own hearts. When we long for the light in Advent, we begin to hope for a world that is more like the Kingdom of God. We hope for a world where people live as if Christ were king, not Caesar, and all Caesar’s manifestations today.

Who is this Christ we call King? Our Colossians passage gives us many images to ponder. They come to us primarily in the wonderful hymn quoted in verses 15-20. We are given metaphors and images to help us capture the essence of the one we call king.

One commentator says not everyone is thrilled by the Jesus revealed in these images. He goes on to say some in our culture are offended by Jesus. The modern culture seems to be obsessed or consumed by sex and the accumulation of money. If you read the Bible carefully, Jesus does not seem to be interested in either.

Instead Colossians says Jesus helps us understand God. We can't see God. But Jesus "is the image of the unseen God." Jesus is the human face of God, as some have put it. God is not human or male. But if God were a male human being, God would look and act like Jesus. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus, says Colossians.

Colossians also affirms several times that Jesus was the first born of all creation. That is an important affirmation. The early Church felt that the resurrection of Jesus was as significant as the first creation recounted in Genesis. The resurrection started a new creation. Paul, in another letter, talks about Jesus being the new Adam. He is the first born of this new order of being.

And, as we know, the first born in that culture was the one to inherit the father's estate. When we affirm Christ as King, we become joint heirs with Christ. Instead of inheriting an estate or land, we "inherit the light" as Colossians says. That is such a touching image. Who could ask for anything more than inheriting the light? It is that light that shines in our darkness and gives us hope.

Colossians also says that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to God's self. This gets into the meaning of the cross, which we have discussed before. We won't spend time on blood atonement theology today. Those who know me know the trouble I have with that theology. Most Christians can affirm God was acting in Jesus' life and death to draw the world into a deep kind of unity. At the same time, God was drawing the world into a closer relationship with God's mysterious, invisible being.

That is the Christ we call King this day. We pledge our allegiance to Christ as King this Sunday. Herb O'Driscoll put it this way, "Christ is the great light before whom we bring our lesser lights." Will Willimon says it in a little different way. He says those in power in our modern culture get a bit nervous when Christians take stances that threaten their hold on power. They want Christians to keep God private and personal. They want religion to be "a personal opinion, a lifestyle option that some people choose."

But when we say Christ is King, says Willimon, we say Christ is not just a matter of our private, personal opinions. Christ is King over all of life. We long for the day when Christians will live as if Christ reigns. We long for the day when reconciliation trumps bitter divisions. We long for the day when people of different religions respect one another. We long for the day when justice is a higher priority than wealth or comfort. May it be so. Amen