

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, AND OTHER OXYMORONS

Formed in Christ: What is the Kingdom?

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46; Psalms 95:1-7a

Today is known as Reign of Christ Sunday, or Christ the King Sunday.

Today we honor the Christ who is seated on a throne,
ruling over the church, the world, and all of creation.

Today we pay homage to the sovereign God of heaven and earth.

That we would hold up this image of Christ on the throne
should come as no surprise to anyone
the *least* bit familiar with the Christian tradition.

It's all through our scriptures, our creeds, our prayers,
our songs, our paintings, our poetry.

Even if you knew *nothing at all* about the Christian tradition,
and visited Park View just once, on Easter or Christmas,
you would be introduced to this notion of Christ on the throne.

In fact, you would be surrounded on all sides
with this whole congregation

proclaiming together in a loud voice that,
“the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth,
and the kingdom of this world

is become the kingdom of our Lord,
and of His Christ,

and He shall reign forever and ever,

King of kings, and Lord of lords,

And He shall reign forever and ever,
and ever and ever,

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! . . . Hallelujah!”

I think that would be hard to miss.

We sing Handel's masterpiece, the Hallelujah Chorus,
twice a year, minimum,

and it's entirely about the reign of Christ.

And in many other ways, *every* Sunday,

especially through the great hymns of our faith,

we worship Christ who reigns, in both this world and the next.

Interesting that we don't actually talk about the subject all *that* much.

We *do* . . . but not nearly as often as we sing about it.

Maybe part of the reason we don't talk about it too much,

is there is frankly some discomfort

among some peace-loving Christians

about such a royal and triumphal image of Christ.

For *some*, perhaps, it's just a tad reminiscent of the days
of Constantinian Christianity,

when this image of the triumphal Christ,

the King of all nations,

was used as inspiration for the bloody conquest of Muslims,
and heathens, and other enemies of the Christian Empire.

I *understand* this hesitance to talk too much
about Jesus the conquering King.

But there is no getting around this metaphor of Christ on the throne.

There is no getting around it in the history of the church,

which from the very *earliest* days of the church,

had developed as its core confession of faith,

the statement that “Jesus is Lord.”

This confession that “*Jesus* is Lord”

was a direct and purposeful affront to the claim of the emperor
who demanded that *he* be worshiped,

who ordered people to address *him* as lord.

Christians refused, saying that Jesus was their only sovereign,
that *Jesus* was Lord, not *Caesar*.

And there's no getting around this metaphor in our scriptures.

Over and over again,

Christ is proclaimed as the one who represents,

and fully enacts the Sovereign rule of God in the world.

The OT prophets and psalms are full of references to God
as King and ruler of all.

And when Jesus comes on the scene,

scriptures tell a consistent story about Jesus

being the true embodiment, the incarnation,

of God the ruler of creation.
Even in *infancy*,
kings from the east came and bowed before him.
Kingship is inherent to the Christ of scripture.

Christ came to establish and rule over a new kind of kingdom,
on earth and in heaven,
the kingdom of God.
“Christ the King” is by no means a secondary theme in scripture
or the Christian tradition.
It is a primary theme.

So Christians around the world devote this pivotal Sunday
in the church calendar,
to our exaltation of Christ as Sovereign Lord.
This is a pivot point, the final Sunday in the Christian calendar.
Next Sunday is the Christian New Years Day.
Advent begins a new cycle.
The Reign of Christ Sunday gets us ready for it.

Nevertheless,
there is this lingering question of how we come to terms
with the historic abuse of this doctrine of Christ as King,
such as the coercive and violent expressions of the doctrine
during the era of the Crusades . . .
or to *some* extent, *today*,
as some Christians would be happy to see *our* country
become a more avowedly Christian nation,
to have Jesus Christ be explicitly proclaimed
head of our national political life.

Well, for *starters*, we don’t deal with our discomfort
by rejecting or downplaying the notion that Christ reigns.
Unless we reject one of the most prominent themes of our faith.

The way to keep from abusing this doctrine,
is found in scripture *itself*,
especially the chosen lectionary scriptures for today.

In the three scriptures we read this morning,
from Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25,
as well as our call to worship from Psalm 95,
we were given a vivid picture of God
as one who has all the powers in his hand to mete out
justice and judgement.
In Ezekiel, the Lord God is portrayed as having full and absolute
authority and responsibility for his people.
He is the one who appoints his servants,
to be kings and princes over his people.
In Matthew, the son of man, that is Jesus Christ,
is described as one who “sits on the throne of his glory”
and from that throne, metes out judgement on the good and evil,
based on the deeds they have done.
In the Psalm, we sang our praise to the great king above all gods,
and we vowed to come and bow down in reverence,
kneeling before the Lord our maker.

Certainly, these are appropriate scriptures
for a Sunday focusing on Christ the King.

Now . . . did you happen to notice what kind of character this king was?
Did you observe what *kind* of king we were bowing to
in these texts?
If you *didn’t*, brace yourself.
It’s utterly shocking.
It’s also so familiar and cliched it’s easy to miss.

In all three scriptures—all *three*—this king is a shepherd.
This all-powerful king of all kings,
with the authority to appoint other kings,
with the authority to judge or withhold judgement,
before whom all creation is ordered to bow,
to kneel in humble and absolute submission,
this king is pictured as a sheep herder.

The people these texts were originally written for—

ancient Israel, and N.T. era Jews and Christians—
they would have gotten the full impact of this shocking image.
They would have been thrown off-balance, scandalized.
Shepherds were the lowly, dirty, smelly,
uneducated, and poor folk in their culture.
Sure, there were wonderful rags to riches stories
like the shepherd David who *became* king.
They knew it was possible for God to have *pity* on a shepherd,
and bring him *up* from that lowly place to a place of honor.

But in these texts, God is the Sovereign King of Kings,
while he is still a shepherd.
He is a shepherd-king.
It is a truly astonishing oxymoron.

This same oxymoron, this same unlikely joining of words,
is even found in the most famous line in the Bible.
We don't notice it, because we've heard it thousands of times.
The opening words of the twenty-third psalm.
"The Lord is my Shepherd."
The one who rules us, who lords it over us,
is a lowly, common, gentle shepherd.

What do we make of this?
What does this tell us about Christ our King?
What does it tell us about the nature of the kingdom of God?

Christ is *not* like any other ruler we know.
Most royalty we recognize by symbols like
crowns studded with precious gems,
robes of velvet and satin,
scepters with gold tips,
signet rings . . .
all symbols of power, wealth, and privilege,
symbols that create distance between ruler and subject.

The ruler we honor in Christ,
chose to be remembered as a shepherd.
I am the good shepherd, he said.

I lay down my life for my sheep, he said.
Christ the sovereign ruler chose to be remembered
in broken bread and wine,
to symbolize his broken body and blood,
given up willingly for the sake of his subjects.
These are the royal symbols of the one who reigns over us
in the kingdom of God.

That way of ruling,
those images of the way God relates to the people God rules,
came long before Jesus ever called himself the Good Shepherd.
Such as this morning's OT Ezekiel and Psalm readings.
This nurturing, healing, seeking, guarding, and guiding
relationship between God and God's people,
is *precisely* the kind of reign and rule Jesus was modeling.
And it's the kind of life we followers of Jesus need to model today,
as we seek to live oriented around the kingdom.

The king we model our lives after—*Christ* the King—
was one who gave up personal comfort and security,
who loved persons on the margins of their community,
who shunned public recognition,
who risked all for the sake of his call.
We've been talking about being formed in Christ.
Right here is the pattern.
Here is the form, the shape, the pattern,
which we use to shape our own lives.

This shape comes into view as we look closer at today's scriptures.

The prophet Ezekiel presented this image of the Shepherd King,
and spoke in the voice of God, saying,
"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,
and I will make them lie down . . .
I will seek the lost . . . bring back the strayed . . .
bind up the injured . . . strengthen the weak . . .
[and] feed them with justice."
That all fits with our image of the good, kind shepherd.

But *this* shepherd is *not* all gentleness and comfort and sweetness.

This shepherd is still *king*.

He still has specific ethical demands on his subjects.

He expects his subjects to treat each other
with the same love and regard he has for them *all*.

And when they *don't*, there *will* be judgement.

The prophet continues, in God's voice,

"I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

Because you pushed with flank and shoulder,
and butted at all the weak animals with your horns
until you scattered them far and wide,

I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged;
and I will judge between sheep and sheep."

You *know*, it's *been* a while since I read that text.

Almost forgot about this vivid metaphor
depicting us, the ill-tempered flock.

We sheep *push* at each other,
shoulder each other out of the way,
butt heads with the weaker ones,
and we scatter the flock.

And the shepherd-king says, with no small urgency in his voice,

"I *will* save my flock . . .
they shall no longer be ravaged . . .
I will judge between sheep and sheep."

And *just* as vividly,

the gospel writer in Matthew 25 paints a picture of the shepherd-king,
who "sits on the throne of his glory," scepter in hand,
and judges his flock.

This judgement is based entirely . . . *entirely* . . .

on how they treated the weak and poor and marginalized.

The shepherd-king will say to those at his right hand,

"Come . . . blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom . . .

for I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty,

I was a stranger,

I was naked,

I was sick,

I was in prison . . .

and you met me where I was
and gave me what I needed."

Then the sheep will answer,

"Lord, when did we see *you* hungry or thirsty
or as a stranger, or naked or sick or imprisoned?"

The shepherd-king replies,

"When you did it to one of the least
of these members of my family, you did it to me."

And *then* the king renders *judgement* against those on his left,
who *failed* to do what the ethics of the kingdom
required them to do.

The image of Jesus as shepherd is utterly inadequate,

if the *only* thing we get from it,
is that Jesus holds and comforts and speaks softly.

This shepherd *reigns*. *This* shepherd renders *judgement*.

Likewise, the image of Christ the King is utterly inadequate,

if the *only* thing we get from it,
is that God sits on the throne ready to mete out punishment
on every sin or weakness we exhibit.

This king is a *shepherd*,
who has a particular, special regard,
for the smaller, weaker sheep in his flock.

And if there are *other* sheep abusing their power
and scattering the flock,
there *will* be consequences.

So this morning,

on this final Sunday of the church worship year,
I invite us *not* to shy away from this wonderful metaphor
of Christ the Sovereign Ruler.

I invite us to embrace more fully,
more gratefully,
this image of Christ who rules
with a passion for justice,
and a deep, and everlasting compassion

for every member of his flock.

Let us now embrace this metaphor in joyful song,
as we sing together a great hymn for Christ the King Sunday,
even though we usually bracket it away for Christmas.
“Joy to the World” . . . HWB 318

This is a song to the shepherd-king.
“He rules the world with truth and grace.”

—*Phil Kniss, November 20, 2011*