

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 23, 2014
Reign of Christ
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Daniel 7:9-14
Psalm 93
Colossians 1:11-20
John 18:33-37

Our long journey through the church year 2014 ends today with “Christ the King” Sunday. Our Scripture lessons, and much of our hymnody, celebrate the reign of Christ over all things as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

For me, there is a sense in which celebrating the reign of Christ is both *easy* and *difficult*. It is easy and natural for me to celebrate Christ as the King *who will one day* come to judge the earth and to reign in glory. There is abundant Scriptural evidence and hymnody to buttress this affirmation. The Apostle Paul told the Philippians: “Every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Hymnwriter Christopher Idle says it this way:

*When the King shall come again all his pow’r revealing,
Splendor shall announce his reign, life and joy and healing.
Earth no longer in decay, hope no more frustrated;
This is God’s redemption day, longingly awaited.*
(*When The King Shall Come Again*, v.1)

Matthew, in his Gospel, reminds us:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he

will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Mt. 25:31-32)

And on the hymn side, Hymnwriter Brian Wren observes:

*Christ will come again, God's justice to complete,
To reap the fields of time and sift the weeds from wheat.*

*Christ will come again, and joy shall be complete,
As flames of lightning love bedeck the judgment seat.*

If you worship here regularly, you are familiar with the fact that every time we worship together, we pray these words: “Thy kingdom come.” As we do, we are praying for the realization of something *yet in the future*. We are praying for that decisive moment in history when life as we know it will stop, and God in Christ will make all things new.

Celebrating the reign of Christ in that sense is rather easy. To pray for and to anticipate the reign of Christ *in the future* is a natural impulse for believers.

It is somewhat more difficult, however, for folks to see and discern the lordship of Christ in the *present*. Our sequence hymn this morning captures it this way:

*Still the weary folk are pining for the hour that brings release;
And the city's crowded clangor cries aloud for sin to cease.
And the homesteads and the woodlands plead in silence for their peace.*

If I were to take a poll of this congregation this morning, I suspect that most of you would easily and quickly affirm the Lordship of Christ *in the future*. But if

I asked you to describe for me areas where you clearly see Christ's Lordship *in the midst of your daily life and circumstances*, I suspect that you might have to think for a moment before you answer. In the midst of the enormous challenges we face as a nation, and when confronted with global crises all around us, the affirmation *Jesus is Lord* does not always roll off our lips readily and easily. At least not for me.

But I was reminded this week that seeing the reign of Christ as a *present* reality depends entirely on *where I look*, and *how* I look.

It occurred to me this week that when I think of the Lordship of Christ, my thoughts are often dominated by the power and the glory and the clouds and the angels and all of that. I think of the *Royal Christ*, the One riding into history on the white war horse. I think in terms of the images from Daniel and our Old Testament lesson this morning.

That's not a bad thing. But those images are bound up with a *future* reality. If I want to see the Lordship of Jesus in the midst of life here and now, I need to look in a different direction. And I need to take Jesus as my cue.

Think about it for a moment. How did Jesus come to us? He came to us as a human being, a child, vulnerable and helpless and weak. And how did Jesus live his life? With whom did he spend his time?

Jesus is the great Conqueror – but *how* did he come to conquer? With great military and political might? No. His great strategy involved the shame, scandal, and pain of a Cross. He demonstrated his mighty power by casting his lot with those who were in the greatest need: those without a voice, those beaten down by life and by their own choices. Those who were vulnerable and hurting.

And then it occurred to me – if I want to see the Lordship of Jesus in the rough- and- tumble daily life in which I live, I need to look for him where he can actually be found: in the plight of the homeless, on the side of the poor, in the face of the needy, and in the company of the imprisoned.

Where can we see the Lordship of Christ in our present world? How about the ministry of LOVE, INC? How about the LOVE, INC budget program? Families come into that program hurting, enslaved by debt, relationships strained to the breaking point. Marriages on the verge of collapse.

I haven't asked Lloyd and Nancy to confirm this, but I'm guessing that they have been trained to see the face of Jesus in the people who come into their care. Because that's where Jesus is present. And when those families enter into relationship with Lloyd and Nancy and others like them, things begin to change. A gracious empowerment begins to take shape in those relationships, and old patterns are broken. The truth begins to set people free. And the larger world doesn't see it

or recognize it, but the *Lordship of Christ has manifested itself in power and glory!*

The Reign of Christ has drawn near!

Where is the Lordship of Christ present in our daily lives?

Dr. JoAnn Lyon, General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, recognized it a year ago at this time in a small white tent across the street from the White House in our nation's capitol. A group of immigrants and advocates had gathered in that tent, and for more than three weeks had been praying and fasting about the plight of immigrants in this country, and about the need to reform a broken system.

Dr. Lyon says that in that tent, she met more than one mother who had been separated from her children. In two cases, that separation had been not for a period of week, or even months – but for years! It was then that it dawned on her that while Immigration has become a huge *issue* in this country, behind the issue of Immigration are *immigrants*, real flesh and blood people. *Policies* may be in need of reform, but in the mean time *people* are in need of compassion.

Dr. Lyon said that the presence of Jesus in that tent was palpable. She knew that something needed to be done. So she set about working with leaders in her denomination, establishing training centers in local churches aimed at helping people navigate the complex legal issues and other problems currently faced by so many. In the midst of praying for reform, Dr. Lyon's denomination (and others)

are becoming the face and hands of compassion for thousands of hurting people, including innocent children. The larger world does not see or recognize it – *but the Lordship of Christ has drawn near!*

When Christians from congregations here in America donate money and then travel to Africa to dig a well so that a village will have clean water, the Reign of Christ is present.

When Christians volunteer to enter into hospice homes to bathe and feed persons who are dying of AIDS, the Reign of Christ is near.

My friend and colleague Pastor Brian Merz recently traveled with a group from his congregation to the Southern most part of Mexico. After landing at an airport, they rode in a van for several hours to a remote place, and then hiked by foot for more than two hours, climbing through heavily forested terrain. At last, they arrived at a tiny village, where they were met by a few men who escorted them into a tiny room that was a church.

The room was packed. An older man began to speak, telling the story how for years he beat and abused his wife. Then pastor Brian's congregation sent bibles and a team of volunteers to help build a tiny church for this village. This man heard the story of Jesus, and his life was changed. "After I met Jesus," he said, "I no longer beat my wife."

Now the larger world does not see or recognize it – *but the Lordship of Christ is a very present reality in that tiny, remote village.*

Perhaps one reason God has placed us together in this faith community is so that we can help each other see the Reign of Christ as a *present* reality in our lives, and not just a *future* hope. Perhaps we are meant to help each other see Christ's reign by training ourselves to look for it in the right places.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, the bread and wine remind us that God does His most extraordinary work through simple, ordinary things. Things easily overlooked. So come with faith. And let the grace He offers you here open your eyes to see His kingdom's power. Let it come into full view – not merely as a *future hope*, but also a daily reality in the present.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.