

November 21, 2021
“Not from This World”
Revelation 1:4b-8 / John 18:33-37
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Today is the final Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. We kick off a new year next week with the first Sunday of Advent.

Today is also known in many church traditions as “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday – an observance instituted in 1925 by the Roman Catholic Church and adopted by many other traditions since, including Methodists.

But I gotta tell ya, personally, I don't buy it. I mean, I don't buy – or at least I do not embrace – any notion of Jesus as KING. For starters, because I don't believe that Jesus understood himself that way. And more importantly, because the so-called “kingdom of God” to which his entire life and ministry pointed WAS AND IS thoroughly antithetical to the inherent nature of hierarchical, authoritarian kingdoms and monarchies.

As much as the church, and the Christian tradition from its earliest days, has proclaimed its Christ as “king” and even “King of Kings,” such a title distorts what Jesus actually said about himself and about God's reign in the Gospels.

In fact, as we see in this morning's reading from the gospel of John, Jesus refuses even to accept the title of “king” in his interaction with Roman authorities – after he is arrested and standing trial.

Answering first to the high priest, the Jewish RELIGIOUS authority, Jesus is brought before Pilate to answer to the Roman POLITICAL authority. Pilate asks him straight up, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Or probably better translated, “King of the Judeans,” referring to the province in which Jesus and his fellow compatriots lived under Roman occupation.

John's gospel, more than the three synoptic gospels, emphasizes this POLITICAL charge brought against Jesus: SEDITION, that he claims to be a king in clear defiance of the Roman emperor's authority; only Jesus never actually makes such a claim himself, including in this exchange with Pilate.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asks. And after Jesus clarifies that Pilate’s question is prompted by others’ claims against him, Pilate asks him what he has done to warrant this charge.

“My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

In other words, Jesus confirms what we already know to be true, that the trumped-up charge of sedition is based on his actions, his teaching about and organizing on behalf of the “kingdom of God.” What we know to be a radical vision of another WAY, a decidedly nonviolent way as he indicates in this response; a way that is NECESSARILY threatening to the worldly power of existing religious, political and economic structures, and INCREASINGLY perceived as threatening because of his growing popularity. PEOPLE power.

And remember that this is nothing new for Jesus. He’s perceived as a threat from the moment he’s born into the world. When the magi, the wise men, approach King Herod, who had himself received the title, “King of the Jews,” from the emperor Augustus, they are trying to locate the child who THEY claim “has been born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Herod feels the threat to his authority and power, even in the form of a child, and does what kingdoms of this world often do when they feel threatened: he resorts to violent suppression. In his case, immediately ordering the execution of all male children two years old and younger in and around Bethlehem – trying to literally eliminate any possibility of another way.

So Pilate asks Jesus again, “So you are a king?”

“You say that I am a king.” YOU say that I am a king. It’s true that he doesn’t deny it, but Jesus certainly does not make any such claim himself. The three other gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke strike a similar tone, though more succinctly: “You say so.” And in those accounts, when he is further accused by the authorities, he simply refuses to answer.

“You say that I am a king,” Jesus responds. And he goes on, “For this I was born, for this I came into the world;” THIS, not referring back to being a king, but to what he says next, “to testify to the truth.” To testify to the truth! Note that Jesus says elsewhere in John that he came “that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” “unlike the “thief (who) comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” (John 10:10).

Jesus came into the world to share the truth at the heart of his radical vision. A vision of abundant life for all that defines God's kingdom – or what we at Calvary refer to as God's “kin-dom” to emphasize its egalitarian nature, neither hierarchical nor patriarchal. Because language matters, it matters.

When the church describes and understands Jesus as king, I believe it misses the full extent of that truth and the full impact of that vision.

The Jesus who was born in a stable and made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, lifted up BY THOSE AROUND HIM as the long-anticipated healer-king, makes a mockery of worldly kingdoms. He is the anti-king – the title doesn't fit! Jesus was not interested in being part of such systems of domination. He was not interested in replicating systems of oppression.

He WAS interested in revolution, a revolution of values turning prevailing systems and structures of power on their heads.

In suggesting, for example, that in God's kin-dom the first will be last and the last first, Jesus is not proposing mere reforms to existing religious, political and economic systems; he's calling for wholesale change – turning those unjust systems completely on their heads, upside down – or as we considered last week, right side up. New wineskins for new wine.

But, of course, a system where the first become last and the last become first still means there are those who are last. And a system where the rich become poor and the poor become rich still means there are those who are poor. It's still an unjust kingdom, not beloved community. Jesus is being deliberately dramatic to make his point about how radically things must change, because his life and ministry clearly and consistently point

to a kin-dom where there are no first and last, where there are no rich and poor. In fact, as we considered awhile back, there is no place for those who are rich – as the rich young ruler learned so painfully (Mark 10:17-27). In God's kin-dom, everyone and everything has enough.

There are variations of the same basic story of the disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest. In Matthew the mother of James and John asks Jesus, on her sons' behalf, if they might sit at his right and left hand, in his kingdom. In Mark, James and John make the request themselves. And in Luke, the disciples are ALL arguing. But the response from Jesus is the same.

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

For the kingdoms of THIS world, of course, the answer IS the one who's at the table. But not so for Jesus. Not so for the kin-dom of God.

And he goes on, then – this in Luke, chapter 22 – to confer on them the kin-dom that God has conferred on him. The kin-dom belongs to all of us.

There is no kingly status, not even for Jesus. In such a kin-dom, it is LOVE, divine LOVE, that reigns. Such a kin-dom, he says elsewhere, belongs instead to the poor in spirit. It belongs to those who mourn. It belongs to the meek.

To those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. To those who are merciful. To those who are pure in heart. To the peacemakers. To little children. To those who are salt of the earth and light of the world.

To those who are “born again,” born of water and the Spirit, who see with new eyes and hear with new ears and love with new hearts.

A kin-dom of divine Love marked by justice, by peace and nonviolence, by radical inclusion and equity, is NOT from this world!

Jesus says God's kin-dom of love is within us if we make space for it, and the kin-dom that begins within each of us as mustard seeds will grow like leaven in bread. And for that reason, Jesus also says the kin-dom is at hand. Near, in fact. Nearer than we think.

Seek God's kin-dom first, before all else, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Now is the time, friends. Call it a new year's resolution, if that helps, or call it a new year's REVOLUTION – that we may commit and re-commit ourselves to the work of kin-dom-building. Following Jesus the anti-king, making way for another WAY where divine LOVE reigns supreme.

May it be so.