

St Paul's Cathedral - Kamloops: 10 am – Nov. 25, 2018
Reign of Christ Sunday / Homilist: Rev. Michael Shapcott

Our friends at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland's longest serving centre for peace and reconciliation, begin their day with these words:

Dear God:

We begin our day with trust,
knowing we are created for loving encounter.

We begin our day with hope,
knowing the day can hold love, kindness, forgiveness and justice.

Help us to make room for the unexpected,
May we find wisdom, may we love, may we live on.

Amen.

A little less than two thousand years ago, a minor Roman official in an obscure imperial outpost stood in front of a non-descript person who had managed to infuriate the local religious establishment. Pontius Pilate looked at Jesus and asked him: Are you a king?

The actual words that we have in the Gospel of John are sparse, but I imagine that Jesus practically jumped backward at the question. No, he replied, not like any king that you know. Or, to use the words we just heard: "My kingdom is not from this world."

So, here we are on the last Sunday after Pentecost, with the joyous season of Advent just before us. With Advent, we are set to celebrate one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith – the arrival of God on earth in the human form of Jesus. Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday. And we take up the question that consumed Pilate so many years ago: What kind of king is Jesus, and what does that have to do with us?

At the 8 am service, I offered a few thoughts on the kingdom of God in Jewish scripture. Now, I'd like to turn to the Book of Revelation and John of Patmos's stunning nightmares and visions of heaven and hell on earth. John offers a shocking and prophetic vision on the consequences of unbridled and unprincipled economic and political power.

The reading we heard is from the introduction to the Book of Revelation, in which John of Patmos offers a structure for the rest of the book. He tells us that Jesus, who loves us and redeemed us to be representatives of his kingdom, will come down from heaven to earth to bring healing and love to all. Notice that the story of Revelation is not of a world that is translated up to heaven, but a world in which heaven is realized on earth. Kind of like when we pray the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven."

John wrote Revelation, apparently from a cave on the island of Patmos, where he had been exiled. He was looking into the dark heart of the Roman Empire in which everything and everyone had been monetized, stripped of any value except what could be procured on the financial market. In his nightmare, he saw: “gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.”

Hmmm. Can you imagine a world in which everything and everyone is reduced to monetary value. There is no inherent value or dignity to humans, or to anything else in the natural world. Only the price that can be commanded in a financial market. A world in which humans are trafficked. Can you imagine a world in which you are what you buy. A world in which a high holiday is Black Friday – a day of relentless and frenzied buying. A world in which basic human needs – like the need for nutritious food, or for healthy and affordable housing – are delivered by private markets in abundance to those who are able to pay, and for those that aren’t – well, they are left to starve in the cold.

John saw this terrifying reality in the Roman Empire around him. He called his hellish vision Babylon, and his dreams of a new world were called Jerusalem.

Fast forward to the 1970s. It was a time of massive political corruption (US President Nixon and Watergate), along with wars around the world, as well as growing economic, environmental and social alienation.

In other words, pretty much like the world today, or the world of the Roman Empire.

In 1973 the theologian William Stringfellow, drawing from the nightmares of John in Revelation, described what he called the “demonic powers” controlling the U.S. economy:

“Babylon is the city of death, Jerusalem is the city of salvation; Babylon the dominion of alienation, babel, slavery, war; Jerusalem, the community of reconciliation, sanity, freedom; peace... Babylon the realm of demons and foul spirits; Jerusalem, the dwelling place in which all creatures are fulfilled; Babylon, doomed; Jerusalem, redeemed.”

Okay, this is pretty heady stuff for us reserved Anglicans on a quiet Sunday morning in a lovely cathedral in Kamloops.

But we are not finished, with Babylon, not just yet. One thing that John of Patmos knew about the brutal Roman Empire was that it wrapped its authority, and sought to achieve legitimacy, in the veneer of a religious mantle.

Starting with Julius Caesar – declared to be Divus Julius, or the Divine Julius by the Roman Senate – it became the practice that the ruler was not merely mortal, but a transcendent god.

In the end, it didn't really matter whether anyone actually believed whether Julius Caesar actually had an earthly mother and actually traced his patrimony back to the god Mars. What mattered was that the forms and structures were dutifully obeyed.

Fast forward to 2016, and the theologian Harvey Cox. In his book *The Market as God*, he takes the terrifying visions of John of Patmos, adds in the sharp insights of William Stringfellow, and names the dominant economic and social order of the 21st century as being wrapped in the mantle of religious authority. He writes:

“To begin exploring the market theology is quickly to marvel at just how comprehensive it is. There are sacraments to convey the salvific power to the lost, a liturgical year, a calendar of entrepreneurial saints, and even what theologians call ‘eschatology’ – a teaching about the ‘end of history’.”

Then he continues:

“The Market is staffed by a variety of people. For some, their driving motivation is just plain greed. They have been infected by the contagion of acquisitiveness. And acquisitiveness is a disease for which there is no known cure... But there are also people who work in the current financial system who would like to see the market reclaim its role as servant to the larger economy and to society as a whole. These people, many of them young and idealistic, often feel trapped in a labyrinth with no visible exit. Its atmosphere is heady and addictive... They need help from outside their golden cage.”

In other words, there are some hard at work in the dominant social and economic order that are true believers that the market sets people free. There are others, the people whom Cox calls the “young and idealistic”, who may not be believers, but nonetheless are trapped in a system in which they see no way out.

If this is all starting to sound pretty darn radical, and a bit scary, well – that is part of the prophetic calling for all people of faith. We read in Isaiah:

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

We need to speak the truth of love and justice to the social and economic powers of our time.

But let's not forget, on this Reign of Christ Sunday, the final and glorious vision of heaven on earth in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation. This New Jerusalem isn't off somewhere off in the sweet by-and-by but right here on earth. It is a place where “mourning and crying and pain will

be no more.” The centrepiece of the New Jerusalem is a river of life, which nourishes the tree of life – which, in turn, is for the healing of all the nations.

Many of you in this place are already hard at work realizing the glorious, the joyful, kingdom of god in many different ways. And for that, we all say amen!

Please let me end with a comment on my new ministry as Executive Director of the Sorrento Centre, a position that I started less than four months ago. For the past 55 years, the Sorrento Centre has sought to live deeply and fully into its mission as “a gathering place for all”.

Many of you have been engaged in the Sorrento Centre over the years, in our arts and culture programs, in our theological explorations, in our youth programming, and on our farm. And for that, we all say, once again, amen!

Our aspiration, in the years leading up to our 60th anniversary in 2023, is to strengthen and deepen our work in fully realizing our mission as “a holy place of transformation for learning, healing and belonging”.

Let me close with a few words from a rapidly emerging initiative of the Church of England called Setting God’s People Free. It was launched with a report to the CofE’s General Synod in 2017 that set out this challenge:

“Will we determine to empower, liberate and disciple the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained and therefore set them free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence, leadership and, most importantly, vibrant relationship with Jesus in all of life? And will we do so not only in church-based ministry on a Sunday but in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday?”

That’s a challenge that the Sorrento Centre is taking up and we want to work with the Anglican Church of Canada, the Ecclesiastical Province of BC and Yukon, the Territory of the People and with all of you in this Cathedral today.

What does it mean, in practical terms, in 2018. Again, I will quote from the four objectives of Setting God’s People Free. They are to:

1. “look beyond and outside Church structures to the whole people of God at work in communities and wider society - not to 'fix' the institutional Church”.
2. “challenge a culture that over-emphasises a distinction between sacred and secular to a fuller vision of calling within the all-encompassing scope of the Gospel – not to limit vocation to church-based roles”.
3. “affirm and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and of lay people, grounded in our common baptism - not to blur or undermine these distinctions”.

4. “propose imaginative steps to nourish, illuminate and connect what is working already in and through parishes and communities of faith - not to institute a top-down approach”.

Now that is a manifesto of change, a way of realizing God’s love and justice in a hurt and hurtful world.

I hope and pray that we can all work together for the common good, and to the glory of God.

I began with words from the prayer book of Corrymeela. I end with their prayer for courage:

Courage comes from the heart
and we are always welcomed by God, the Croí of all being.
We bear witness to our faith,
knowing that we are called to live lives of courage,
love and reconciliation in the ordinary and extraordinary
moments of each day.

We bear witness, too, to our failures
and our complicity in the fractures of our world.
May we be courageous today. May we learn today.
May we love today. Help us to embrace possibility,
respond graciously to disappointment,
and hold tenderly those we encounter.

May we be fully present to the day.

Amen.