

St Paul's Cathedral - Kamloops: 8 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?

Here are two things that are helpful to know as you imagine this scene:

First, the English word king is from the Greek word *basileus*. It can mean an earthly prince. And it also includes the divine. So, Pilate was asking Jesus: Are you a god-king? You may think this is a rather strange question. Consider this:

The Roman world was infused with god-kings. Divus Julius – the Divine Julius, Julius Caesar - was worshipped as supreme leader and as god. He claimed an earthly mother, Julia, and traced his patrimony back to the god Mars. He was one of a number of god-kings.

The idea of a god-king was woven deeply into the fabric of the Roman Empire. It's hard to know what the average person might have actually believed. One thing is clear. It was political. A person became a god-king by declaration of the Roman Senate. Minor officials (like Pilate) found it useful to associate with god-kings to legitimize their own position.

It is probably safe to say it didn't really matter what people believed, as long as they followed the practices of the god-king cult. The cult was not about getting to heaven. It was about the here and now. About who is in charge. It was about political, social and economic power – bowing to emperor and imperial state with an unthinking obedience.

So, Pontius Pilate was asking Jesus a pointed question: Are you claiming you are like the Divine Julius? A god-king with absolute authority over an empire?

Jesus's answer was equally blunt: I am not that kind of god-king. Adding, in case Pilate missed his meaning: "My kingdom is not from this world." In other words, the Roman empire and other human kingdoms – wracked with injustice and inequality – that is not the kingdom of Jesus.

So, here we are at the last Sunday after Pentecost, with the joyous season of Advent before us. With Advent, we celebrate a central mystery of the Christian faith – the arrival of God on earth in the human form of Jesus. But this god-king we worship is utterly different than the Roman god-kings – and the kingdom of god we seek is completely unlike imperial Rome or any other earthly dominion – including, for that matter, the Dominion of Canada.

Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday. We take up the question that consumed Pilate: What kind of king is Jesus, and, for that matter, what kind of kingdom is he offering?

In the next few minutes, we'll look briefly at Samuel to get a sense of the kingdom of god in Jewish tradition. If you are keen, please come back for the 10 am service, when we will turn to the Book of Revelation and John of Patmos's stunning visions of heaven and hell on earth. John offers a robust insight into the meaning of King Jesus and his kingdom on earth.

For now, back to Samuel. The kingdom of god in Jewish writing not primarily focused on some after-life. The vast bulk of Jewish law and practice was concerned economic and social relationships amongst people, between people and the surrounding world, and between people and their god. The reading we just heard from Samuel is described as "the last words of David". Here is what he had to say:

"One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land."

Justice – doing what is fair and reasonable, doing what is morally right – is not an abstraction. Time and again, we read in Jewish scripture that justice is measured in practical ways: How the widow, the orphan, the poor person, the newcomer – how they are actually treated. We read in Isaiah that to remove the chains of injustice means, among other things, to:

"let those who are oppressed go free, and break every yoke you encounter! Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don't hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood!"

Jesus, of course, was constantly calling his followers to pay attention to real justice in the real world. The Reign of Christ is a tangible and practical justice for all!

The theologian Walter Rauschenbusch published a book exactly one hundred years ago that set out a theology for a new movement to realize the kingdom of god – a movement called the “social gospel”. He said:

“The social gospel is the old message of salvation but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul... But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within in. It has not invoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion.”

The social gospel inspired a generation of Christian leaders – including Canada’s own Tommy Douglas, widely recognized as the father of public health care in this country.

In our Anglican tradition, the theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, took up the challenge of realizing the kingdom of god in a troubled world. His book *Christianity and Social Order* (1942) proposed a new kind of government that would be attentive to the real needs of people: education, housing, health care, income. Three years later, the government of Clement Atlee was elected to create what we have come to call the “welfare state” – that is, the state in which the welfare of all the people is the foundation for public policy.

Our current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has called for Anglicans and other people of faith to be leaders in a moral renewal of public policy. He notes that we live in a time of economic, social, political and environmental crisis, and adds:

“Moments of change are moments of great hope and opportunity... This is true provided that the hope for change may be built upon values of virtue and grace, of love and common humanity, and not on selfishness, inward-looking self-absorption, self-protection and fear.”

Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say – in words similar to these: “Your kingdom come, you will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.”

As I look out, I see many people in this place who are already working diligently to realize the kingdom of god right here and right now on this earth in this time – a kingdom of love, and justice, and joy, and inclusion. Please know that your neighbours down the road at the Sorrento Centre are committed to continue to support you in this sacred work as we live into our mission as “a holy place of transformation for learning, healing and belonging”.

To which I can only end with:

Amen.