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Whose King?  
Martin Grove United Church  
November 20, 2016  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 23:33-43

Since this is “Christ the King Sunday”, I’d like to begin with a quote from a ministry colleague from Newmarket. Rev. Dawn Hutchings says, “I usually have the presence of mind to book my vacation or some sort of continuing education event that takes me far away from the pulpit on Christ the king Sunday.” I wonder what scares my colleague so much about this celebration. I wonder if 10 minutes from now you’ll all be wishing that I had taken a holiday today.

The celebration of Christ the King Sunday was instituted in 1925, in an attempt to stem growing secularism and to remind Christians that Christ was king, not the local political powers of the day. Today, secularism exists on a scale that was not even imagined in 1925. But perhaps the question of “whose king is Christ” is also more meaningful today.

I would like to quote from one of the non-canonical gospels. Non-canonical gospels are stories about Jesus that didn’t make it into the Bible for various reasons. This particular gospel missed being included in the Bible by about 1600 years. This is the Gospel according to Tim Rice, sometimes known as the Rock Opera “Jesus Christ Superstar”. This reading is from the scene where a group of people are dancing and singing praises to Jesus, and Simon Peter proposes a “better” strategy to Jesus. This scene combines a common view of the Jewish messiah found in the Old Testament with a New Testament understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was - with some really cool dance moves and a driving rock beat. I won’t sing or dance it - but here’s the text: First, the crowds are singing:

- Christ you know I love you. Did you see, I waved. I believe in you and God so tell me that I’m saved. Jesus, I am with you. Touch me, touch me, Jesus. Jesus I am on your side. Kiss me, kiss me, Jesus.

Then, Simon starts explaining his plan to Jesus. Simon Peter starts with an observation and then gives his advice to Jesus on how Jesus’ ministry might proceed:

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- Christ, what more do you need to convince you that you've made it and are easily as strong as the filth from Rome who rape our country and who've terrorized our people for so long.
  - There must be over 50,000, screaming love and more for you. And every one of 50,000, would do whatever you asked them to. Keep them yelling their devotion, but add a touch of hate at Rome. You will rise to greater power, we will win ourselves a home. You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever.

Then, the dancing stops, and Jesus responds with this:

- Neither you Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes nor doomed Jerusalem itself understand what power is, understand what glory is, understand at all
- If you knew, all that I knew, my poor Jerusalem You'd see the truth, but you close your eyes. While you live, your troubles are many, poor Jerusalem.
- To conquer death you only have to die. You only have to die.

Simon's reaction to Jesus's response is to simply stare blankly at Jesus.

At the time of Jesus, many people, including Jewish people, were living under Roman rule. It is only natural that those people should want to live under their own rule. It is only natural to think that the way to achieve that freedom is through military force. Simon is making the very rational, logical suggestion that Jesus had enough followers to attempt a military overthrow of the Roman forces occupying Palestine at the time. That's what the coming messiah was supposed to do. The messiah predicted in the Jewish Bible was expected to bring political and economic freedom to the nation. Simon recognized Jesus as this coming messiah, but had come to realize that Jesus was missing something. That missing ingredient - according to Simon - was for Jesus to inject some hatred of Rome into his teachings - to get his followers all fired up for a military conflict with Rome. Preaching love was not going to bring the changes that Simon wanted to see.

Simon was logical. He was rational. But he did not understand that hate and love are different messages. And in the gospel according to Tim Rice, Jesus tells Simon bluntly that he has missed the point. In our reading from Luke this morning, other people miss the point of Jesus's ministry. It's easy enough to make Jesus fit our image of him,

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rather than seeing him for who he was.

Next week is the beginning of Advent. And during Advent we will sing well-known and well-loved songs. But let's reflect on some of the words, and see if they actually represent the Jesus of the Bible. Start at the beginning. VU 1 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel", contains the words "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." Lovely words. Lovely tune. But did Jesus actually liberate Israel? No. Look at VU 91 "The First Nowell", which contains the line "Born is the king of Israel". Was Jesus the king of Israel? No. Israel rejected Jesus. And more importantly, Israel rejected Jesus as the messiah for *good reasons* - which Simon could tell us all about - Jesus did not fulfill the role of the messiah who the Jewish people were waiting for.

How could this be? Either the Jewish people were waiting of the wrong type of messiah, or Jesus was not the Jewish messiah. So - whose king is Jesus anyway? Historically, the Church has argued that Jewish people are wrong, and they "missed the boat" by not recognizing Jesus as messiah. I reject that thinking. Historically, Jewish people have argued that since Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, that Christians are delusional. I reject that thinking too. But the answer is perhaps simple. Jesus is "king" for Christians - not because of Old Testament prophecies which were not fulfilled anyway, but because of the life and ministry that Jesus lived. Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, but is instead the Christian king.

But however we slice it, Jesus never quite seems to be who we expect. As a case in point, consider the 2 images of Jesus on our bulletin cover. The top image is an image of Jesus from the famous Turkish (former) basilica Hagia Sophia. The image was fairly typical for a Greek Orthodox Church in the 6th Century, depicting Jesus as one with power and status. The bottom image on the bulletin cover is the less famous "Homeless Jesus" statue currently installed at Regis College in Toronto. The statue is a depiction of Jesus - there are nail holes in his hands and feet - huddled on a park bench like any other homeless person. If you ever get the chance to visit the statue, please go. And try to sit beside Jesus in the space you have. The extra space on the bench is just large enough to sit in - but by design - not comfortably.

Which image of Jesus can you relate to? Jesus the king? Or Jesus the homeless

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person? Or can you relate to both? Or perhaps you relate to neither.

This is the final week of the Christian calendar. Next week is the first week of Advent, a time when we wait for Jesus to come. But how will we recognize Jesus in our midst? Who will we be looking for? Will you look for someone bringing peace? Will you look for someone bringing military force? Will you look for a king? Will you look for a homeless person?

Christ the king Sunday was created because of rising secularism. Secular really just means not religious. Sometimes the division is named differently - sacred vs profane. But I have always wondered ... if God created everything, then isn't everything sacred? If even the profane is "from God", how then is it not sacred?

In Matthew, after Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in two. What did that symbolize? The temple curtain was in place to separate God from mankind. The curtain separated the part of the temple where the priests would regularly go from the "Holy of Holies" where God was said to reside. When the curtain was torn - symbolically - there was no longer any separation between God and humanity. But more than that, there is no longer any separation between the secular and the religious. There is no longer any separation between the sacred and the profane.

Consider this communion bread. Symbolically, it represents the body of Jesus. But what about the bread itself. Is it special? Should it be? No! Part of the power of communion is that completely profane objects - bread and juice - can be filled with sacred meaning. When we celebrate baptism, part of the power of baptism is that a completely profane object - Toronto tap water - can be filled with sacred meaning. The sacred and the profane can be the same thing.

Jesus the king might look like royalty, or he might look like a homeless person sleeping on a Toronto park bench. There is no separation between the sacred and the profane because it is all God's world. Keep that in mind when you look for Christ in our midst this Advent.

*Amen.*