
Christ the king ... of what exactly?
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 2 Samuel 22:31-43 and John 15:9-17

Today, we celebrate “Christ the King Sunday”. Also called “Reign of Christ Sunday”. But I need to tell you that many of our Christian brothers and sisters do not celebrate this particular Sunday. Many churches have moved away from this celebration because they do not like the word “king” applied to Jesus. The argument goes that the term “king” is sexist, it is undemocratic. It is not a modern word. It is not a modern concept. In our post-modern age many people struggle to understand the idea of “royalty”, whether applied to people or to Jesus. It seems that “royalty” just does not mean what it used to mean to common people. In many churches this morning, they will instead be celebrating “Christ the Friend” Sunday.

[image: christ the friend]

I myself share some of the views of the critics of the word, “king”. I have never understood how a democratic country can have royalty, since royalty are not elected. I used to be a supporter of the idea of “Christ the Friend” Sunday, which seemed so much more ... gentle. So much more friendly. And besides, in our reading from John, Jesus explicitly calls his disciples his friends. Jesus, referring to the disciples, says, “I no longer call you servants ... Instead, I have called you friends.” Perhaps if Jesus was here he would not understand the idea of “Christ the King” Sunday either. And besides all that, “Jesus the Friend” Sunday just sounds way more United-Churchy - don't you think?

So you can imagine my surprise when I learned a bit of history, and I learned to appreciating “Christ the King Sunday” in new ways. I was surprised to learn that the whole idea of celebrating “Christ the King Sunday” was only brought into church tradition in 1925.

[image: pope pius xi]

It was initiated by the Italian Roman Catholic Pope Pius XI. In the encyclical Quas Primas of that year, it says “It is by a divine inspiration that the people of Christ

bring forth Jesus from his silent hiding-place in the church, and carry him in triumph through the streets of the city, so that he whom [people] refused to receive when he came unto his own, may now receive in full his kingly rights.” This is not abstract support for the sovereignty of Christ. It is a call to bring Christ out of the church. It is a call to Christians to stop hiding behind their own allegiances. Including allegiance to the church if necessary. And to live as if Jesus was truly king. It is a call to stop worshiping false gods. It is a statement that Christ is king - not someone or something else!

To understand this, we probably need to understand what was going on back then. But what was going on in Europe in 1925? Who were the other contenders for our allegiance? Who or what else was claiming the hearts and the minds of people? The “alternative kings” in 1925 in Europe were Communism and National Socialism. The Pope considered these “demeaning to human dignity and in violation of basic human rights”. But we are not off the hook either. The Pope also saw evil in the western democracies of the time, labeling them as “Conspiracies of Silence”. Christ the King Sunday in 1925 was a strong reminder that if we are to have a king at all - it had better be Christ!

[image: quas primus]

The Quas Primus has been called “possibly one of the most misunderstood and ignored encyclicals of all time.” In it, Pius XI notes that Jesus's Kingship is not obtained by violence. 'Christ,' the Pope says, 'has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but God's by essence and by nature.' The Pope instituted the feast of “Christ the King” in 1925 to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven. As opposed to any earthly ruler, which was claimed in Italy at that time by Benito Mussolini. The encyclical affirms what other Popes have said, that Christ's Kingship is not based on “human power” but on loving and serving others.

[image: christ the king stained glass]

The words in Second Samuel remind us that many humans do believe that human power and military force is the appropriate path. And it is very easy to make it sound as if God's path is a path of power, and that God is with us on our path to war. The reading depicts a “god” who supports genocide. “You [God] made my enemies turn their backs to

me, and I destroyed them. My enemies cried to God, but God did not answer them. I beat [my enemies] fine and crushed them and stamped them down.”

And that sentiment has been shared by many people. In 1095, another Pope, Urban II, started a military conquest that developed into what we now call “The Crusades”. Although sources differ, Fulcher of Chartres expresses the Pope's words to begin his project in this way. “I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ's heralds to publish this [notice] everywhere and to pursue all people to carry aid promptly to those Christians [in the holy land] and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends. Moreover, Christ commands it.” That “vile race” was of course the Saracens. People who today we would call “Muslim”.

[image: christ the homeless]

The belief that “God” wants us to slaughter everyone who does not agree with us is a very old and stupid idea. That is why the words of Jesus are so radical. Even today. Jesus commands us to love. Perhaps the Quas Primus is the most misunderstood and ignored encyclical of all time. But it is equally true that the command by Jesus that we should love each other is “the most misunderstood and ignored line in the entire Bible.”

Recent terrorist attacks remind us that some misguided people still believe that God is a “god” of war and destruction. At least if we read our own scriptures, we can take comfort in the fact that terrorist acts were popular long before the creation of Islam. The words in Second Samuel describe a “god” who calls for terrorist attacks. That is not my God.

This week our media really ramped up the rhetoric against Russia. And Trudeau has made it very clear that he wants to punish Russia. And I'm sure that many of you agree with that approach. The problem is that if we (and the US has explicitly stated this) want to extend and escalate the war in Ukraine in order to “punish Russia” we need to remember that every day that the war continues, innocent people suffer, die, are maimed, are malnourished, and have their lives ruined. The real cost of any war should be measured by how many lives are destroyed. It is pathetic that we only consider the financial costs of war. Yes, we can punish Russia - but at what cost? And of course, we are not the ones paying the cost.

And so the Quas Primus seems just as relevant today as it was in 1925. The names of the players have changed. But we are still faced with the same social and theological dilemmas. Authoritarian regimes cannot bring justice. Vague, non-committal silence by western democracies who only fuel the continuing conflict cannot bring justice either. Because neither of those approaches - domination or silence - appear to be very helpful. Neither of these approaches create the sort of world that we we dream of. So Christ the King Sunday is a reminder to all of us. It is a reminder that there is at least one other path - that there is at least one other option. And that option is to bring Jesus out of the safely and security of the church, into the community. Into our community. The option that we rarely try is the path of love.

[image: brantford]

But what does that really mean? What might that really mean - here in Brantford? What does it mean to bring Christ out of the church into the community. I will argue that what we need to do it bring out the body of Christ. But - and we will be reminded of this during communion this morning - we ourselves are the body of Christ. Bringing Christ out of the church means taking ourselves out of the comfort of this church to go into our community.

[image: trans day of remembrance advertisement]

One - of many - opportunities to bring Christ out of the church into the streets is to join in the vigil at 7 pm this evening to honour the Trans Day of Remembrance. We are meeting at Harmony Square (at the Hudson Public) and marching to the library - to the tree that has been installed at the library.

[image: tdor tree]

The leaves on the tree are named for different people who have been murdered simply because they were trans. In 2021, 375 trans people were murdered because they chose to live into their authentic selves. That is completely unacceptable.

The number of trans people who are murdered in Canada is low. But trans people in Canada have to put up daily with verbal and/or physical abuses. They are often beaten, stabbed, and attacked. They are denied jobs for which they are qualified. They receive similar inhumane treatment that people in many racialized communities live with. That

too is completely unacceptable.

Perhaps you struggle yourself with accepting trans people. Or perhaps you do not know how to respond when you hear someone else express transphobic comments. Here is what I do. If someone makes a transphobic comment, I ask the person who made the comment whether they are currently looking for a new sexual partner. Most people say no, of course. And then I tell them that if they are not currently looking for a new sexual partner, they should not care about another person's sexuality or gender. Trans people are people. Period. End of story.

Brantford Pride posted this advice to Instagram this week. The advice was in the form of two meditations. There is one meditation for trans folks, and one meditation for cis folks. If you do not know the term cis "c-i-s" it is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth. Trans folk are people whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth. For example, I am cis.

Here are the meditations:

[image: meditation for trans people]

"For trans folks: May I be loved unconditionally by the people around me. May I find and invest in spaces that adore and respect me. May I be kind to this body, as complicated as it can be. May I trust that trans people are magical, here and now, and across time and cultures. I am magical, important and inherently lovable."

[image: meditation for cis people]

"For cis folks: May I be relentless in my alliance to trans people. May I kindly examine everything that blocks unconditional love of trans people. May I risk my own likeability to be in solidarity. May I show up in small mundane moments and in the profound public moments. May I remember that my liberation is bound in that of trans people."

How else can we bring Christ out of the church and into our streets? Later on in this service we will be singing the hymn, "Christ has no body now but yours". That song evokes many images of what it might mean to bring Christ out of the church.

[image: bullets below]

Christ has:

- No hands but yours to heal the wounded world.
- No eyes but yours to see as Christ would see.
- No feet but yours to journey with the poor.

I hope that the hymn tantalizes you into new ways to reach out. Because truly, Christ has no body now but ours. The only real question is - what will we do with our bodies?

Now - I'm not crazy - I know that at this church we already engage with our community in a number of ways. We feed people. Just yesterday a bunch of us were handing out winter clothing at Victoria Park because Norm initiated what he calls the "Keeping Warm" Project. We also provide direct support in a variety of ways. Some of us intentionally spend time engaging with people who are experiencing homelessness.

And yet, how often do we think of ourselves as intentionally being the presence of Christ to others. How often, when we are speaking with someone with an unknown background do we intentionally try to be the light of the divine for them and with them?

And while we are out being divine presence in our community, if we are observant, we will discover that the spirit is already there. We are not only called to be the presence of Jesus in our world. We are also called - I believe - to recognize the many and varied ways that God is already present in the world, and in our community. That is why our printed bulletins include a heading near the end of the service that says, "We go - to participate in the healing of the world". We do not go to heal the world. We go to participate in the healing that is already happening all around us.

We can find the divine in our community - fragile and mixed community that we are. We can find the divine in our congregation - fragile and confused though we can be. And we can find the divine in ourselves, fragile and imperfect beings that we all are.

[image: communion]

We will be celebrating communion today. And we will use bread to symbolize the body of Christ. At least that is what our liturgy will say. But we all know that the bread is not the body of Christ. We - collectively - are the body of Christ. Participating in communion is not about eating a snack. Participating in communion is about each of us accepting the call be Christ for each other, and for others. You know the phrase, "there is

no free lunch”. Those words apply big time to communion.

As we are called to be Christ in our own world, let us seek out the divine presence that is already waiting for us. We can find it on the streets. We can find it right here. Who knows - perhaps we can even find it in each other.

Amen.