
Reign of Love
Chapel in the Park United Church
November 24, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Luke 23:33-43

Today we celebrate “Christ the king Sunday”, also known as “Reign of Christ Sunday”. Great! But what does that actually mean? Well, for one thing, it means that we are having communion today. It also means that next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Advent. But what else does Christ the king Sunday mean to us? With apologies to any royalists here today, I think we are living in a post-royalty, democratic society. If you like, I can give you the history of the origins of Christ the King Sunday sometime. But today, I want to focus more on - what does it mean to reign. And what sort of reign do we actually need today?

[image: crown of power]

One idea of what it means to reign comes from our reading from Jeremiah, “And he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and the people will live in safety.” Jeremiah shares an image of a king that is strong enough in a military sense to execute justice and righteousness. Having the political clout to create an environment for “our” people to live in safety at the expense of other people if necessary. That’s a very familiar - and completely human - image of what it means to reign.

[image: crown of thorns]

But our reading from Luke provides a very different image of what it means to reign. “The leaders scoffed at Jesus, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, God’s chosen one!’. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’. There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’” And how does Jesus respond? He asks God to forgive the people who are abusing him. Luke gives us an image of Jesus reigning in a spiritual sense, not in a physical sense. In military and political terms, the Jesus movement was hardly a blip on the radar. And yet, Jesus reigned

in other ways that are more subtle, more internal, more enduring, and more meaningful. Jeremiah speaks of reigning through military force and dominance. Jesus speaks - and lives - of reigning through inner spiritual peace and healing. Luke reminds us that Jesus was never about social or political force. His kingdom was not a kingdom of affluence or control. Jesus's spiritual kingdom was both from and for the weak and the powerless.

And perhaps today is the perfect time to be reminded of that message. Next week is the first week in Advent, when we will all be invited to start looking for Jesus in our midst. So before we start looking around, it's good to remember that we need to look for Jesus not in places of power, but in places of weakness and vulnerability. We need to look - not in the penthouse suite of Trump towers, but in the byways and sidewalks of our own community. And in the byways and sidewalks of our own hearts. But I'm getting ahead of myself by at least a week now.

[image: deesis mosaic]

I was reflecting on this image this week because for me it blends together at the same time the ideas of reigning, and enduring, but also, weakness. Does anyone recognize this image? It comes from this place:

[image: Ayasofya exterior]

This is the famous structure known as "Ayasofya" located in Istanbul, Türkiye. I am always stunned by the history of this place. It was constructed in the year 360 as a Greek Orthodox Cathedral. In 537 it became a Byzantine Christian Cathedral. In 1054 it became a Roman Catholic Cathedral. In 1231 it became a Greek Orthodox Cathedral again. In 1453 it became an Ottoman Mosque. In 1935 it became a museum. And in 2020, it became a Mosque again. Through that time it survived wars, a number of fires, many earthquakes, and countless other disturbances.

[image: Ayasofya interior]

Ayasofya is one of the places I have visited where my camera completely failed to capture the reality of the moment. The emotion and sense of space and presence.

[image: deesis mosaic]

And this image shows the famous Deesis Mosaic found in the upper south gallery which has survived all of those disturbances. The mosaic depicts Mary, Jesus, and St.

John. The mosaic is partially damaged, by neglect, by weather, by age, and yet, it endures. The mosaic is an enduring symbol of Christian (and Muslim) faith. To me the mosaic is a visual blending of the idea of reign with the idea of having no real political power. The mosaic survives, but it does not dominate. It reigns, and yet it is at the mercy of others. It survives by being - and remaining - on the margins.

OK - I've changed my mind. Perhaps it is not too early to think about Advent after all. Because the gospel story also reminds us that it's almost time for our annual bun-fight with the people who put up those signs that say, "Keep Christ in Christmas." [image: keep christ in christmas lawn sign]

This is a movement that attempts to restore christianity to its former power and glory in our society. But the story in Luke reminds us that Jesus was never about that. Jesus's kingdom is not a kingdom of influence, or power, or control. His spiritual kingdom was for the weak and the powerless. If Jesus was about spiritual power, why do Christians today work so hard to achieve social and political power in the name of Christianity? And if you actually like this movement please relax, you can keep your lawn sign. But we will discuss how to really keep Christ in Christmas - in a moment.

Rev. Emily Heath put it this way, in this extended quote. "Every year I hear about some Christians who interpret the 'Happy Holidays' greeting given to them at stores to mean that there is a full-on, multi-front war against their faith. I find it ironic that the person checking out their big screen TV on Black Friday somehow is thought to have some power to destroy Christmas. But even so, some Christians are absolutely livid about the fact that we no longer keep Christ in Christmas, and (in their perception anyway) no longer keep Christmas at centre stage this time of year.

[image: santa coke]

What they fail to understand is that culture didn't remove Christ from Christmas. We Christians did. We accepted the transformation of Advent, the period from late November until December 24th, from a time of holy watching and waiting to one of hyper-consumerism and cultural observances. So much so that when we go to a big box store and don't hear 'Merry Christmas' we see it as an attack on our faith instead of the rightful separation of the commercial from the spiritual.

I believe the greatest attack on Christmas has come from within. It has come from those of us who claim our greatest hope comes from the fact that God became a person of goodness, kindness, justice, and love. And who then act nothing like that person did.

And so here is my suggestion to Christians about how to keep Christ in Christmas: this season, worry less about the holiday policies of non-religious institutions, and worry more about whether we are actually listening to, and then doing, what Christ told us to do. In short, keep Christ in Christmas by acting like Christians.

Next year I'd love to hear the rhetoric around a "war on Christmas" change its focus from intolerance for other beliefs, to concern about how we Christians have lived by those teachings in last year. Did we follow the Prince of Peace? Or did we wage a war that has nothing to do with what he taught us? Next December I'd like us to realize that [image: "Keeping Christ in Christmas has nothing to do with what others choose to do, and everything to do with who we choose to be" ... Emily Heath]

Keeping Christ in Christmas has nothing to do with what others choose to do. It has everything to do with who we choose to be. And how we choose to act. If we can change that focus, then what the cashier says at the checkout won't threaten our Christmas joy one bit."

Back in the day when Christians had all the social clout, it was Christians that drove the commercialization of Christmas. Some people blame non-Christians for the decline in Christmas. But I think the birth of Jesus was put into the background by Christians. It was Christians in North America that decided it was ok to align the nativity with images of rank consumerism. It was Christians who decided that Santa and Jesus belonged side-by-side. It was Christians who turned Christmas into a shopping opportunity.

[image: santa camel]

For one example, consider Richard Joshua Reynolds. He was raised methodist and became Presbyterian after he married. Good Christian stock as we used to say. He also founded R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. Among other things they produced Camel cigarettes. And R.J. had no problem letting Santa market his products.

Youth minister Stephen Ingram is even more blunt on the topic, declaring that the whole “Keep Christ in Christmas” movement is in fact a heresy.

[image: “As a person of faith, you do not have to keep Christ in Christmas, [Christ] is already there. [Christ] is there with the lonely, the depressed, the joyful and the confused” ... Stephen Ingram]

“As a person of faith, you do not have to keep Christ in Christmas, [Christ] is already there. [Christ] is there with the lonely, the depressed, the joyful and the confused. [Christ] is there with the widow and the orphan, with you, with me and with the atheist. As people of faith it is in these places, fueled by grace, love and hospitality, we can, not bring Christ back to Christmas. But join with [Christ] in the work [Christ] is already doing, and sometimes work [Christ] is already doing in spite of the best intentions of [Christians].”

Personally, I feel like the whole “Keep Christ in Christmas” movement is more about keeping the word “Christ” in Christmas. But to me the real point of the exercise during Advent is to be as Christ in every way that we can. Period. Christ will always be in Christmas if we live as Christians. We just need to understand the difference between a symbol. And the meaning behind that symbol.

[image: don cherry]

It’s a bit like the recent situation with Don Cherry. As I’m sure you know, Don Cherry, who was part of the CBC’s coverage of national hockey for 34 years was fired a few years ago for making divisive, racist comments. Specifically, he blamed immigrants to Canada for not wearing poppies around Remembrance Day. And therefore - in Cherry’s mind - not respecting the Canadian troops who fought in times of war. There has been a huge decline in the wearing of poppies over the past decades, both among recent immigrants and long-time Canadians. But Cherry decided to lay the blame for the decline solely on immigrants, using the famous phrase “you people” to single them out. Many people were incensed by Cherry’s firing, stating that he should not be fired because he is such a strong supporter of Canadian troops, and is “very patriotic”.

I cannot comment on how patriotic Cherry is. But I can tell you that his grasp of

history is a bit weak. In World War 1 for example, approximately 450,000 Canadians saw military action abroad. During the same war, more than 1.3 million soldiers came from India. India contributed about 3 times as many soldiers to the cause than Canada did. Canada should be thanking India for its role in World War 1, not the other way around! I myself found it deeply offensive that Cherry accused immigrants from India and other places of not supporting the war effort and just coming over here for the “milk and honey” when India contributed more to the war effort during WW1 than Canada did.

[image: war memorial]

Our media spun the issue into a fight about many issues, but completely avoided the real issue. Which is how can we reimagine Remembrance Day in a way that will be more meaningful to future generations. Because the current ways of celebrating Remembrance Day are not working as well as they used to for many people. Particularly younger people.

But it’s much easier to just blast away at visible symbols. Cherry used 2 symbols, the poppy, and immigrants. And the people who want to “Keep Christ in Christmas” use 1 symbol, the word “Christ”.

In Chit-Chat this week I offered my own suggestion on how to keep Christ in Christmas. Feed the hungry. Befriend the lonely. Visit people who have been abandoned in hospitals and prisons. I guarantee we will keep Christ in Christmas if you and I do those things.

[image: fish]

But perhaps we can do better. Perhaps we can actually think about and embrace the meaning behind the symbols. Instead of embracing the symbols themselves. I find that the “Keep Christ in Christmas” movement is focused on the wrong thing. It seems to be focused on making sure that the word “Christ” is pushed into people’s faces. But as Advent approaches, I encourage us all to simply live as Christ more often. To take yourself to places of insecurity and vulnerability. To be Christ for and with whoever you find there. You will not be alone.

[image: communion bread]

In a few moments we will be celebrating Holy Communion. Remember the

bread? [get some bread]. Is this the body of Christ? Sometimes in our liturgy we lift up the bread and declare that it is the body of Christ. But in spite of sometimes relapsing into historic language, the answer is “no”. The bread is NOT the body of Christ. WE are the body of Christ. As we participate in communion ourselves, we remind ourselves that we are the body of Christ. Taking communion is when you agree that you are willing to be - or at least try to be - the body of Christ yourself.

I invite you to celebrate communion here in worship. And I invite you to celebrate communion every time you meet a stranger on the street. It’s really the same thing you know. Be a blessing to others, and you will be blessed. We are the body of Christ.

[image: rain of love]

Today, we do not need a reign of words. We do not need a reign of force and control. We need a reign of love. Now go - and be like Christ.

Amen.