Christ the King: Whose king exactly?
Chapel in the Park United Church
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Based on 2 Samuel 22:31-43 and John 15:9-17

Today we celebrate “Christ the King Sunday”. The celebration of Christ the King Sunday was instituted in 1925. This was 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 imaginable in 1925. And today, another question also emerges on Christ the King Sunday. Namely. Whose King is Christ, exactly?

I'm sure you know that there are 4 gospels in the New Testament. And there are other gospels - called “non-canonical” that did not make it into the Bible. There are over 35 “official" non-canonical gospels that were not included in the Bible for a variety of reasons. The best known of these is perhaps the “Gospel of Thomas”. I want to quote from a non-canonical gospel that missed being included in the Bible by about 1600 years. I mean the Gospel according to Tim Rice, sometimes known as the Rock Opera “Jesus Christ Superstar”.

[image: jesus christ superstar]

This reading is from the scene where a group of people are dancing and singing praises to Jesus, and Simon 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.

[image: jcs dancing]

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.

[image: simon discussing]

Then, Simon starts explaining his plan to Jesus. Simon starts with an observation and then gives his advice to Jesus on how Jesus' ministry could be improved.

- 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.

[image: simon disappointed]

Simon's reaction to Jesus is to simply stare blankly at Jesus in confusion and disappointment.

At the time of Jesus, many people, including Jewish people, were living under Roman occupation. It was only natural that those people should want to live under their own rule. It was only natural to think that the way to achieve that freedom is through military force. That is precisely the image conveyed in our reading from 2 Samuel this morning. The image that peace is achieved through victory and slaughter. So 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 people through military conquest.

Simon recognized Jesus as that messiah. But Simon 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 social transformation that Simon wanted to see.

Simon was logical. He was rational. But Simon did not understanding that hate and love are incompatible messages. And in the gospel according to Tim Rice, Jesus tells Simon bluntly that Simon has missed the point. Jesus tells Simon that Jesus is not the expected messiah.

In the church, we have sometimes made that mistake ourselves. Sometimes, language that Simon might have preferred has crept into our liturgies, and our hymns. [image: advent]

For example, next week is the beginning of Advent. And during Advent we will sing well-known and well-loved hymns. But if we reflect on the words, we may find that the words do not represent Jesus and his ministry particularly well. Some of these words seem to have come from Simon, not Jesus.

We can 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. Loverly tune. But did Jesus actually liberate Israel? No. In Jesus day, Israel did not exist as a state. So we have to imagine that the word "Israel" referred to Jews living in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Even so, did Jesus liberate them from the Roman occupation? No.

Now Look at VU 91 "The First Nowell", which contains the line "Born is the king of Israel". Was Jesus the king of Israel? No. The vast majority of Jews living in Palestine never even heard of Jesus. Of the ones who actually knew Jesus, the vast majority did not see Jesus as the Jewish messiah for very good reasons. As I've just explained. Jesus did not do the things that the Jewish messiah was expected to do.

The simple truth is that a tiny minority of Jews - including the disciples - declared that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. Initially, that group was a small sect within Judaism. Over time - perhaps 200 years - that small sect within Judaism evolved into it's own group we might call followers of the Christian faith. And in the year 313 the Edict of Milan granted legal rights to Christians, which allowed the Christian faith to grow into what we now call the Christian religion.

This history led to two problems that are still with us today. Which are being fixed today.

Historically, the Church has argued that Jewish people are wrong, and they "missed the boat" by not recognizing Jesus as their messiah. Today we - at least in the United Church of Canada - reject that attitude as antisemitic and wrong.

Historically, Jewish people have argued that since Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, that Christians are delusional. We reject that thinking too. My Jewish friends also reject that thinking by the way.

Today both of those issues are - potentially - being fixed. We, as a society are becoming much more tolerant of people from different religions. Mainly because we live, work, and raise our children together these days with people from around the world who follow different religions - or no religion at all. And we can all get along. Because we are all human beings.

Yes, some Christians still hate Jews and some Jews still hate Christians. But I see signs that this is changing. For the better. We do not have to hate each other. And more broadly, we do not have to hate anyone because of what club they happen to belong to. Period.

But this means that the question - whose king is Jesus, exactly - is important. The answer is perhaps simple. Jesus is "king" for Christians - not because of Old Testament prophecies which Jesus did not actually fulfill. But because of the life and ministry that Jesus lived. Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, but is instead the Christian king.
[image: heart hands]

Christ is king - for Christians - because of his teaching about love and acceptance. These were expressed well in our reading from John this morning where John's Jesus

said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

That was the message that Simon struggled to embrace. I must tell you though that I have some sympathy for Simon. I don’t agree with his conclusion, but I am sympathetic to him as a person. We covered this pretty well 2 weeks ago too …. On Remembrance Sunday.

In brief, some people - including people of faith - want to achieve peace through war. And some people - including people of faith - want to achieve peace through justice. Simon and Jesus are on opposite sides of that debate.

Simon struggles with Jesus because Simon expected and wanted a messiah who would bring peace through military force. But Jesus instead gives us a vision of peace through justice. The struggle between peace through war and peace through justice is fundamental to the human condition.

[image: Thorncliffe park]

Actually, we saw this played out in our own community a few weeks ago. The police organized a “community safely walk” in Thorncliffe Park. A number of residents participated, including the Lukas family. In truth, there were not that many residents. Most of the participating represented the politicians that are here to serve us. And there were 5 or 6 police officers. It was a good event. Feel free to ask the Lukas family what they thought of the event. But what struck me is that the political representatives I spoke with could be divided into two camps. One camp said that the way to deal with crime in our own communities is to have a larger police presence. The other camp said that the way to fight crime has to include programming for residents - particularly for youth - so that they have things to do. The ideas is that many youth get into crime because of boredom and a sense of disenfranchisement. The solution must involve youth programming and other projects to increase the community’s sense of identity and allow for everyone’s local engagement. Those two camps are just a very local version of the wider debate between peace through war and peace through justice. As I said, this is fundamental to the human condition.

[image: come thou long-expected Jesus]

Who here remembers that hymn Come thou long-expected Jesus? I long for the

day that someone writes the hymn:

[image: come thou un-expected Jesus]

Because Jesus did not fit the expectations that people had for him. And I think for the past 2000 years Jesus has continually not fit the expectations that people have had for him. We all have an image of the Jesus we want. And sometimes, that does not agree with the Jesus we actually find in the pages of the Bible.

Because however we slice it, Jesus never quite seems to be who we expect. Consider these images:

[image: hagia sophia]

This image is an image of Jesus from the famous Turkish (former) basilica Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The image was fairly typical for a Greek Orthodox Church in the 6th Century, depicting Jesus as one with power and status.

[image: homeless jesus]

This image is the less famous “Homeless Jesus”. When I was at Emmanual College this was installed outside Regis College. I don’t know where this photo was taken. There is more than one version of this statue. The statue is a depiction of Jesus - there are nail holes in his hands and feet - huddled on a park bench like any other person living with homelessness. If you ever get the chance to visit one of these statues, please go. And try to sit beside Jesus in the space provided. The extra space on the bench is just large enough to sit in - but by design - not comfortably. The artwork intentionally invites us to reflect on the fact that if we want to sit with Jesus, we may have to be a bit uncomfortable.

[image: hagia sophia and homeless jesus]

Which image of Jesus can you relate to? Jesus as a person of power? Or Jesus the person living with homelessness? Or can you relate to both? Or perhaps you relate to neither. Or perhaps you have your own image. I encourage you to share your image of Jesus with someone this week.

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 in our midst. But how will we recognize Jesus in our midst? Who will we be looking for? Will you look for someone bringing

justice? Will you look for someone bringing military force? Will you look for a king? Will you look for a homeless person? Who - or what - will be you looking for?
[image: earth]

I want to close with a short discussion of secularism. Christ the king Sunday was created because of rising secularism. Secular just means not religious. Secular is also seen as profane, meaning not sacred. But I have always wondered … if God created everything, then isn't everything sacred? If even the "profane" is "from God", how 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 humankind. 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 given sacred meaning. When we celebrate baptism, part of the power of baptism is that a completely profane object - Toronto tap water - can be given sacred meaning. The sacred and the profane can be the same thing. It even works on people. Normal people that we are, even we be given sacred meaning. The only question is whether or not we accept that. This applies to everyone, even our neighbour. Even our non-Christian neighbour.

Jesus the king might look like royalty, or he might look like a person sleeping in an encampment right here in Thorncliffe Park, Brantford, or wherever you live. There is no separation between the sacred and the profane because it is all God's world. Let's keep that in mind while we are looking for Christ in our midst this Advent.

Amen.