

What Does it Mean for Christ to Reign?

a sermon preached on the Feast of

The Reign of Christ

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Lections: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

What does it mean for Christ to 'reign'? The criminal hanging on the adjacent cross clearly thought that it meant having the power to save himself. ¹ This is not the first time Jesus has met such a temptation. In the post-baptismal wilderness the tempter offers him authority over all the kingdoms of earth. ² His faithful disciple Simon Peter declares that no suffering may befall the Messiah. ³ Those 'sons of thunder' James and John tempt Jesus to adopt the power to smite his enemies in the Samaritan town who will not receive him. ⁴ In the garden of Gethsemane his disciples urge him to lead them in taking up arms against the Jewish and Roman authorities. ⁵ What does it mean for Christ to be King? Or in the language of the 6th century BCE prophetic hope, what does it mean to be the "righteous Branch [who] shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land"? ⁶

Honesty demands that we face up to the facts of church history regarding this question. Without doubt, Christ's kingship has mostly been interpreted literally, and juridically. That is to say, Christ has been framed as a monarch sitting on a throne, executing judgement. Much of the language which the gospel writers and St Paul inherited depended on an ancient juridical view of the Divine intervention in the world. God as judge of the thoughts of human hearts and actions. God who dispenses justice from a throne on high. In the Jewish breakthrough this throne became a 'mercy seat' symbolised by the Ark of the Covenant', a religious revolution when compared with the previous vision of God as wrathful and vengeful. In the christian dispensation this mercy seat becomes the focus of atonement in and through Christ. ⁷ But in spite of the fact that Christ himself clearly resisted all attempts to reduce his kingship to a juridical mode, we christians have tended to undo Christ's own instruction on the matter. Thus Christ as king is a moral guardian, an all-seeing observer of behaviour – in recent times narrowed down dangerously to personal sexual behaviour - dishing out rewards and punishments. This thorough-going reduction of the kingship of Christ as judge has inevitably spawned the very worst aspects of christian history. It is this moral and juridical kingship, in concert with christianity's exclusive claims as the bearer of the final revelation, which have nurtured demonic descendants of the sons of thunder. Christ is the imperial monarch who lurks beneath the aggressiveness of so much missionary endeavour, of religious crusades and wars.

Perhaps it seems disloyal to say all this? Nevertheless, christian faith remains shackled by this dark truth. On this United Nations International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women ⁸ it is sobering to be reminded of the link between monarchical and juridical Christianity and violence against a great many minorities, including women. As we consider an Episcopal election in this diocese, and the turmoil within the worldwide Anglican Communion, we all are obliged to reflect honestly upon these facts. The credibility of all christians, as well as the christian mission itself, is at stake.

During the last century there have been attempts to re-imagine the kingship of Christ, drawing on streams of the tradition which have always been running, albeit deeply and frequently out of sight. Teilhard de Chardin, drawing upon St Paul, John the Evangelist and the third century 'church father' Origen, envisaged a cosmic Christ, organically, physically and literally filling all things in all, ⁹ consummating the fullness of the world –

¹ Luke 23:39

² Luke 4:6

³ Admittedly, Luke has cleaned up Peter's reputation, omitting the embarrassing references made by both Mark (8:32) and Matthew 16:22.

⁴ Luke 9:54

⁵ Luke 22:49-50

⁶ Jeremiah 23:5

⁷ Hebrews 9:5 *ἡλασθηριον* *hilasterion* From the Hebrew word 'to cover', the revealing of God's graciousness, through the vicarious action in Christ.

⁸ By [resolution 54/134](#) of 17 December 1999, the General Assembly designated 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and invited governments, international organizations and NGOs to organize activities designated to raise public awareness of the problem on that day.

⁹ <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/violence/>

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:28

the One who “gives [the world] its consistence to the entire edifice of matter and Spirit.”¹⁰ Reacting against a progress-evolutionary perspective reckoned to have given tantamount approval to imperialism, others have sought to escape the idea of ‘kingship’ altogether – turning instead to a theology of embodiment which favours the inclusion of all who have been oppressed by monarchialism.¹¹ Common to both is the insight that the sovereignty of Christ when envisaged as an external and a juridical reality is bound to lead to violence, oppression, imperialism. So the breakthrough which began in Christ, through the Incarnation – but which has been obscured through much of the christian centuries – is the reign of *Christ as one of us*, as fully embodied, as integral to this world and all its profusion and dazzling confusion of life.

What does it mean, then, to say that Christ is king? What is his ‘kingdom’ like? It is like mustard seed or yeast.¹² It is that realm in which “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”¹³ This king rules over an upside-down kingdom. Furthermore, as the One reigning over creation Christ is not the external judge out there somewhere, fixated on adding up all my moral misdemeanours. Christ is the king who is Word-made-flesh, who must therefore be native to our humanity, whose reign cannot be imposed from outside or above, but must arise naturally and organically within our own flesh. This king rules, rather, from the cross, in the dung-heap, in all humility as one fully human, and as the one whose heart is forgiveness and reconciliation.¹⁴ This is the ‘king’ who is the principle, the first-born of all creation,¹⁵ the prime mover and animator of our thinking and our feeling and our acting. Allegiance to this king means nothing less than that our ego must give way – “I am living no longer as I,” wrote St Paul, “but Christ lives in me.”¹⁶ To say that Christ is king is to accept the sovereignty of this One who lives in me, in whom my small ego-self finds its true and proper place in that tremendous synthesis of opposites which we call the cross.

What does it mean, then, to say that Christ is king? Here is the great mystery of our humanity and God’s incarnation – if Christ lives in us, then his reign must also be completely native to our own messy and ordinary and frail humanity, the true identity which arises from the seamy and messy dark depths of our souls. Or to borrow from the 14th century Meister Eckhart:

What good is it to me
if Christ hung on a cross once, long ago,
if I do not also hang on a cross?
What good is it to me
for the Creator to make his Son to reign
if I do not also reign with him
in my own time and my culture?

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¹⁰ Teilhard de Chardin P (translated by Rene Hague), *Science and Christ*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p167.

¹¹ For example McFague S, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, pp159-195.

¹² Luke 13:18-21

¹³ Luke 13:30

¹⁴ Luke 23:23,43

¹⁵ Colossians 1:15

¹⁶ Galatians 2:20