



Sermon

Colossians 1:11-20 / Luke 20:27-38

The Reign of Christ

November 25, 2007

Historic St. George's UMC

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LORD Jesus?

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...whether thrones, or dominions, or rulers or powers...he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together...in him all of the fullness of God was pleased to dwell... Colossians 1: 15-19

Today the cycle of another year on the Christian calendar comes to a close with a festival that celebrates and proclaims Jesus Christ's lordship over all things. Whether we call it the festival of "Christ the King" or by the more contemporary name "Reign of Christ Sunday," the message is the same: Jesus Christ is Lord. As the words of an early church hymn put it, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God... [the one who] holds all things together... the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

That's a mouthful – not all that easy to chew or digest either. I mean here we are singing "Rejoice the Lord is King," sounding all regal about Jesus and the gospel reading speaks NOT of his appearing in glory, defeating the powers of evil forever, with the *The Hallelujah Chorus* playing in the background. Instead we hear Luke's haunting version of the crucifixion, Jesus beaten-down, broken and battered, at his weakest and most vulnerable, facing what looks for all the world like a butt-whipping. This is the Reign of Christ? Go figure.

The church, by virtue of its placing this particular text on Christ the King Sunday must be saying something about the way Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord and King not because he once went toe to toe with Pontius Pilate and could have got the governor to back down if he really wanted to, not because he could have called ten thousand angels to swoop down like a squadron of F-16s to save the day. The church has taught that Jesus is Lord because his strength is revealed in his

weakness, because his victory is accomplished in his vulnerability and what looks like his defeat.

This is a pretty tricky idea to say the least. So, on this Reign of Christ Sunday, I want us to think together about what it means when we Christians say at baptism, at confirmation, in creeds and affirmations of faith: "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Aside from the centuries of Christian tradition in calling Jesus "Lord" and the almost rote ways these words roll off our tongues, admit it. This title isn't the easiest to relate to – especially from the perspective of North Americans. We've never really had kings and lords. Nor have we held to bloodlines, crowns and scepters. It's easier and more comfortable to nuzzle-up to kinder, gentler names and images of God and Jesus like Friend, Lover, Guide, and Guardian.

For all that, there is something to be said for calling Jesus "Lord" in the faith statements we make.

First, saying "Jesus is Lord" is as much saying something about who is NOT Lord as it is saying something about who is. In other words, for Christians to say "Jesus is Lord," as they have across the centuries, means the likes of Aphrodite, Mars, Caesar, mammon and George Bush ARE NOT lord.

There are certainly people who believe that using a name like "Lord" for Jesus creates an air of exclusivism, domineering, command and control. Point taken. But in another way, speaking for me, as myself, to say that "Jesus is Lord" means that Jesus commands my loyalty and commitment in a way that no other earthly authority should. I owe other earthly authority figures my respect, compassion and prayers but my deepest and ultimate trust belongs to Jesus and his reign or Jesus and "his program," as

New Testament scholar Dominic Crossan likes to say.

In that faith knowledge, I find freedom to question earthly leaders and respectfully dissent. For just this reason holding to Jesus as Lord has proved a powerful force in history. Sixty-eight years ago this weekend, German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached at a communion service at a secret seminary in Nazi Germany. His vision of Jesus as present and alive in the bread and wine, despite present and pending losses that would take their toll before war's end, and even take his life at the end of a hangman's noose inspired Germany's Confessing Church to resist Adolf Hitler. In similar ways, a vision of Jesus as Master filled African American slaves in this country with hope for freedom and the faith to persevere singing songs like: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'roun, turn me 'roun, turn me 'roun; Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'roun, keep on walkin', keep on talkin', gonna build me a brand new world." In the days of the Civil Rights Movement, they added a verse: Ain't gonna let no administration turn me 'roun...

To say "Jesus is Lord" is to say there is no other lord in your life.

Second, to say that "Jesus is Lord" is saying something about Jesus to big for mere words. To say that "Jesus is Lord" is a poetic statement. Saying "Jesus is Lord" uses the limits, the metaphorical capabilities of language, to express a faith conviction. No human language could ever do justice to expressing the fullness of who God is or how God is revealed in Jesus. Finding the perfect language within our comfort-zones can at the same time reduce Jesus to a cozy, easy image that it doesn't challenge, or stretch our faith let alone transform us.

Recognizing the limits of language, we may do better, at times, to call Jesus by a name that doesn't feel as comfortable as an old shoe or automatic as "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear..." Jesus is Lord, but, for example, he is not the leader of a feudal state, not a member of British aristocracy (no matter how beautiful the Book of Common Prayer sounds), nor is he a landlord who refuses to turn the heat on before the first frost.

Jesus does have power, though. He does want something from us. But his power is different from the world's power and his demands are different from the world's demands. Language only goes so far in describing this. No name or title we use for Jesus will completely speak or unlock the whole truth of who he is to us or anyone else for that matter. So, at times, using a slightly "outside the box" name for Jesus may be better for us than using the more comfortable name that lulls us into thinking we've "got him," or we fully understand who he was or is, leaving no mysteries about him beyond our understanding.

"Jesus is Lord" means that Jesus cannot be explained easily in words, or reduced to terms that make us comfortable and in control.

Third, to say "Jesus is Lord" is to make a faith statement that is full of awe and surprise about a God who has a way of turning things upside down to set them straight. Think of this: We say "Jesus is Lord" about a man born in a stable, of no means, money or reputation, who didn't have an army, a treasury, stock portfolio or pension, who was executed and buried in a borrowed tomb. This is the one who brings God's life to flesh and blood. Jesus is Lord precisely by his being unlike any other Lord or ruler or king we have ever encountered.

"Jesus is Lord" means this whole "lord" thing must mean something altogether different than we are apt to think. "Jesus is Lord" means power, strength and victory must be different from what we think of as power, strength and victory.

What is the sign of Jesus' power, strength and victory? It is a cross: In the midst of his ordeal with death, in the middle of the execution by those who found him threatening the order of things, what does he say? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And to a thief who is dying by his side: "Truly, today you will be with me in paradise." With his dying breath he says things that I can barely speak on a good day. He loves his enemies.

You don't do this without deep spiritual strength. If you have ever forgiven someone who has hurt you, you know how much it takes out of you. Things like mercy and forgiveness sound nice and good but if

you've ever had to really show them, you know you almost couldn't do it if you could do it at all.

But Jesus knew the ultimate prize was not survival at any cost, but courageous, life-transforming love and mercy. He came to love, heal and forgive. All the powers of evil were not able to defeat him in that mission. No wonder we say "Jesus is Lord!"

Last year about this time, at our Wednesday evening study group we heard teacher/preacher/writer Tex Sample, tell a story about what it means when "Jesus is Lord."

The story was about someone named Jimmy Hope Smith, an old friend from Alabama. Jimmy Hope Smith was the first person in his family to go to college, then seminary, at a prestigious northern eastern university. He even went to earn a PhD in aesthetics of all things. But for all that, Jimmy Hope Smith, never lost his southern drawl and his rural Alabama way of relating to the world. He said, educated or not, he "weren't ever gonna talk no other way" and that if any professor from some prestigious northern eastern university want to change that "he could go straight to hell."

Now Jimmy Hope Smith had a father even more Alabama and proud of it than he was. His father was seriously unredeemed. So one day Jimmy Hope Smith is home visiting for the holidays. The TV is on and Jesse Jackson comes on Larry King. Jimmy's father, the unredeemed, blurts out in words not fit for church (even in Alabama), "Why that trouble-making SOB. Somebody ought to shoot his black behind (except Jimmy Hope Smith's daddy didn't say behind)."

"Daddy," Jimmy Hope Smith says back to him, "do you really believe that? Do you really believe somebody ought to shoot

Jesse Jackson? Because if you do, daddy, you ought to go to church and pray for somebody to shoot him."

"What's the matter with you boy?" his father snapped back. "You crazy, boy? You crazy?"

"No sir," Jimmy said right back. "If you really believe believe it, you oughta go to church and pray for it."

"Boy," his Daddy said, "you know well and good Jesus ain't gonna put up with that crap (except he didn't say "crap".)

More analytically speaking, Jimmy Hope Smith the PhD in aesthetics of all things, would say that when his Daddy goes off into the unredeemed areas in his life, what he needs to do is "put his Daddy back into the story of Jesus." Because as far as his Daddy is concerned, "there ain't no flies n Jesus." And as soon as he puts his Daddy back into the story of Jesus, it changes the way he thinks. It changes the way he puts the world together.

Changing the way we put the world together, the way we think, the way we act, the way we serve and even more who and what we'll serve. That's what saying "Jesus Christ is Lord" truly means.

God, you gave us your Son, the beloved one who was rejected, the savior who appeared defeated. Yet the mystery of his lordship illumines our lives. Show us in his crucifixion and death a victory that crowns the ages, and in his broken body the love that rises to unite heaven and earth.

Amen.

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