Who's in Charge Here, Anyway?

Colossians 1:9-20

November 20, 2016

In the Christian Year, today marks the final, crowning day of the calendar. It is known as "The Reign of Christ" or "Christ the King" Sunday. It typically falls on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Since we've had a year of gratitude, it seems fitting to express gratitude on this day for Jesus the Christ, the one in whom all things are held together, the head of the church.

The Reign of Christ Sunday is not as well-known as other Christian holidays. In researching the origins of this day, I discovered that this is a relatively recent addition to the Christian year. Pope Pius the XI instituted it in December of 1925. At the time, it was a powerful symbolic action. Europe was facing an uncertain future. Mussolini had been the leader of Italy for three years. A rabble-rouser named Hitler had been out of jail for a year. The Nazi party was growing in popularity and the world lay in a great Depression. Pope Pius XI asserted that, despite all of these dictators and false values in the world, Christ was King of the universe. Christians knew where their ultimate loyalties lay - not with dictators or power manipulators, but with Christ! He was our true leader, our true King - and he was unlike any of these earthly leaders who one day would pass away.

Eight years later in 1933, members of the Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches in Germany spoke up. They wrote the Barmen Declaration which strongly declared in the face of the Nazi regime, that Jesus Christ was the only Lord. It was a time when, according to the introduction to the Barmen Declaration, "Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted ... the rule of Hitler as God's will for the German people." The Barmen Declaration stated, among other things, "We reject the false doctrine [that] there [are] areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords ... " [8.15] and "We reject the false doctrine [that] the church [is] permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions." [8:18]

We see that the Reign of Christ Sunday was begun as a way to theologically oppose any earthly power that would attempt to masquerade as God's power. Placing Christ the King Sunday at the finale of the liturgical year was a way of reminding the church who and whose we are. It challenges us to wrestle with
questions such as, "Who's in charge here, anyway?" and "To whom or what do we owe our allegiance and loyalty?"

Fifteen years ago after September 11, 2001, a woman in Santa Barbara wrote a pledge of allegiance. It reads:

"I pledge allegiance to the Ten Commandments
And, to the humanity for which they stand;
One world united in harmony,
With liberty and justice for all."  

She had placed an asterisk before the words Ten Commandments, and at the bottom of the page, the asterisk noted these words, "Ten Commandments or the moral equivalent in each of the world's religious traditions."

At that time amidst our nation's fear, confusion, vulnerability, and stress, this woman articulated her ultimate allegiance. It was a way of grounding herself in the face of uncertainty. In anxious times, it is helpful to anchor ourselves in our core beliefs.

The Reign of Christ Sunday calls our attention to the ultimate allegiance for all Christians. In truth, to be human is to have many allegiances. We have commitments to families, to employers, to friendships, to the country in which we hold citizenship. All these allegiances enrich life. But when those allegiances inevitably come into conflict and competition, it is crucial to know our priorities. Instructed by scripture and the tradition of the church, today we affirm that among the various allegiances of our lives, our ultimate allegiance is to God. But it is not enough simply to say that one's highest allegiance is to God.

One of Berthold Brecht's Kuener stories states: "Someone asked Herr Kuener whether or not there was a God. Herr Kuener said, 'I would advise you to ponder whether your conduct would change in any way depending on your answer to this question. If it would not change, we can drop the question.'"

The issue is this: how does our allegiance to God, whom we know through Christ Jesus, shape our values and our conduct? That ultimate allegiance should be the defining influence upon all other loyalties, our family lives, our citizenship, and our character. The teachings of Jesus guide us in our relationships and instruct how we exercise our commitments as citizens of our local community, our nation, and our world.

Thirty years ago a Russian exile said, "In Russia, Christians are tested by hardship, but in America you are tested by freedom. And testing by freedom is much harder. Nobody pressures you about your religion. So you relax and are not so concentrated on Christ, on His teaching, how he wants you to live."
Paul's letters are written to emerging churches in which people were struggling to integrate their new Christian faith in the face of former beliefs and competing powers. It would be tempting to take the unfamiliar and fit it into the existing worldview. However, Paul says that becoming a Christian "is not simply a matter of fitting Jesus into our present way of thinking. We are transferred, moved, deported, from one kingdom to another, from one way of living into another. Nothing is as we have known it." iv

We fall into that temptation, too, thinking that we can fit Jesus into our worldview. That leaves us in charge. And because I'm right, surely Jesus must agree with me! However, Paul says "it needs to be the other way around; Jesus himself must become the worldview into which we then fit all the rest." v We place ourselves under the reign of Christ and the world is turned right side up. The scripture says, "God rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the royal domain of the Son God loves" (Col. 1:13 CEB).

Paul is saying that to follow Jesus is to orient one's life in a new way. We don't simply follow the whim of the day or our personal preferences or the current trend or what is most convenient. To claim Christ as lord is to give the ministry and teachings of Jesus ultimate priority in our lives. Christ is our moral compass, the center in which all things are held together.

Guided by Christ as our moral compass, our behavior reflects the virtues exhibited by Jesus. The letter to the Colossians goes on to offer some specifics about behaviors and virtues which mark the new life in Christ. We are to put to death parts of our life such as moral corruption, evil desire, greed, malice, slander, and obscene language. "As God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other, and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other .... And over all things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:12-14 CEB).

As we wrestle with our nation's deep division, we have an opportunity to embody these virtues in even greater degrees. We have a choice: we can lapse into cynicism or we can rise to act on our convictions. We can wallow in fear or anger, or we can speak up for the values embodied by Jesus the Christ. We can speak truth to anything that tries to masquerade as God's power.

In England I heard a story of a priest who happily finished his Sunday sermon on Thursday. On Friday he received word that the King would be worshiping at the parish church on Sunday. He called on the laity to spruce up the church grounds and prepare a special tea for the occasion. He set to work revising his sermon, in which
he lavished high praise upon the King and extolled the name of the King and his righteousness.

A week after the King's visit, a very large crate was delivered to the parish. With curiosity the people gathered 'round as the priest pried open the box. Inside was a cross with a life-size figure of Jesus nailed to it. With the package came a note from the King: "This is to be placed on the wall directly opposite the pulpit, lest you ever again forget who it is we worship: the Almighty, loving God."

We give thanks that in this great nation, we have the freedom of religion. We give thanks for Jesus the Christ, who saves us from our sinful selves and raises us to new life. We affirm our ultimate allegiance to God, whose guidance instructs all other loyalties. May God give us strength and endurance to embody the values and conduct embodied by Jesus himself.

Eternal God, your fullness was revealed in Jesus Christ, for whom we give you thanks and praise. We place Christ at center of our lives as our guiding compass. Through him we seek reconciliation to you, O God, and to our neighbors. Send Christ's reign of peace and justice in all its splendor. Amen.

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* Ibid.
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