

The King of kings  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
Date: November 20, 2011

11:33

In seminary, there was one class I really wanted to take, and I waited until the last semester of my last year to sign up—it was Seasons of Celebration: Worshipping through the Liturgical Year with Mary Luti, undoubtedly one of the best professors at Andover Newton. This class was designed to help us think creatively about worship and better understand the rhythms and feast and fast days of the Christian year. We dealt with worship controversies—can you sing Christmas Carols during Advent?, should you read the Passion on Palm Sunday?, should the minister wash peoples' feet on Maundy Thursday?, how should you commemorate All Saints Day?

Some of you may be thinking, who cares about stuff like that and you'd better not ever wash my feet. But for a self-proclaiming church geek like me, these are worship issues that I find interesting. So this class enabled me to think critically about long-standing Christian traditions and local practices in congregations and challenge it all.

Because of Mary and this Worship class, I came to see this Sunday in the church calendar as a very special Sunday. Technically, the first Sunday of Advent begins the Western Christian Liturgical year—that's next Sunday. So this Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday as some traditions call it, acts as a bridge between the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, last Sunday, and the beginning of Advent, next Sunday. This is a day of transition, as we've been reading texts about signs of the end times—like the 10 Bridesmaids and their oil controversy or the Parable of the Talents and we're soon going to be reading texts about the future, about the one who will come into the world to show us a different way. But today, we get to see a glimpse of the glory of the Son of Man and we get to think about his reign on earth right now.

Our passage begins with the Son of Man coming in all his glory, "and all the angels with him." [1] It's worth thinking—what would the Reign of Christ look like? How is the Reign of God different from the way our governments function in all nations of the earth? Increasingly, I hear people get more and more frustrated by politicians and the whole political system—it seems like controversies are a constant these days and ethics and really working for one's constituents doesn't always happen. It seems like our political climate is like Groucho Marx once said, "Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedies."

So on this Reign of Christ Sunday, we get to consider what it would look like if Jesus Christ ruled the earth, really ruled the earth. For one thing, people are judged as successful, good, righteous people based on pretty different standards from that of our earthly society. The righteous are judged to be righteous because they fed and quenched the thirst of the hungry, they welcomed strangers, they gave clothes to people who had none, they took care of people who were sick, and they visited prisoners. Because they did all these things, they are judged by the Son of Man in all his glory to be righteous.

For the people who are accursed, they are judged to be so because they didn't do any of those things. Actually, a similar story line to this one can be found in the Walt Disney movie Beauty and the Beast, which is one of the greatest animated movies of all time in my humble opinion! At the very beginning of the movie, before you meet Belle and Gaston and all the other characters, you see a gorgeous castle in the woods, and here's what the narrator says:

"Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, the prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind. But then, one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within. And when he dismissed her again, the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. The prince tried to apologize, but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart. And as punishment, she transformed him into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell on the castle and all who lived there." [2]

In the passage from Matthew, the accursed folk don't exactly get transformed into beasts like the enchantress did to the unkind prince, but the accursed are told that they are to depart from the Son of Man "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." [3] Both the beginning of Beauty and the Beast and the punishment doled out in this passage are really harsh, and I wish that I could tie them up in a nice red ribbon and make it easier to handle. I don't think any of us relish getting judged for our actions or lack thereof and possibly being condemned because we didn't always do the right thing. And there's the whole faith versus works argument of the Protestant Reformation to think about too.

But what this passage points to, in the words of Worship scholar Laurence Hull Stooky, is that "God's reign becomes a kind of metaphor by which to judge and on which to base human behavior. Talk about the reign of God makes apparent the deficiencies of human rulers and provides clues as to what might make human governance more just." [4] We are to think about applying these principles to our life here on earth right now. When we actually care for, clothe, and feed children of God, we are caring for, clothing, and feeding Jesus Christ. That is a really powerful and important thought, a revolutionary one actually. It's no wonder that Jesus got into trouble all the time with teachings like this!

Taken within the context of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew is trying to distinguish Jesus' teachings from those of other contemporary Jewish groups. There was a lot of family fighting going on at the time, and Matthew often self-consciously has the habit of smugly saying anything you can do, we can do better.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says it like this, "The admirable principle that the verdict is based on the treatment of the deprived outcasts is the Matthean Jesus' last warning to his followers and to the church, demanding a very different religious standard both from that of those scribes and Pharisees criticized in chap. 23 and from that of the world that pays more attention to the rich and powerful." [5] Matthew is trying to say that the reign of Christ turns religious and political systems upside down and transforms the very way our society treats people.

The first will be last and the last will be first. The righteous are those who help their brothers and sisters, not the ones who ignore those in need or turn old beggar women away from their castles on a winter's night. The people who are ignored by other religious authorities and government officials are to be cared for and loved as if we are loving and caring for Jesus himself. That's why the king in the passage says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." [6]

The Reign of Christ is a radical and revolutionary concept. If we allowed Jesus to rule the world, things would look pretty different than they do now. And maybe we would be ready for that to happen tomorrow or maybe we wouldn't. But as we go into Advent next Sunday, as we begin our next Christian liturgical year together, I pray that we will consider what this King of kings, Lord of lords, and Prince of Peace came among us to do, and how he wants us to live out his teachings on earth today. Amen.

[1] Matthew 25:31.

[2] Beauty and the Beast, 1991.

[3] Matthew 25:41

[4] Laurence Hull Stooky, Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church, 140.

[5] Raymond E. Brown, An Introduction to the New Testament, 199.

[6] Matthew 25:40