

The Reign of Christ (C)  
*Jeremiah 23.1-8/Psalm 148/Colossians 1.11-20/Luke 23.33-43*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
25 November 2007

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today many Christians around the world are celebrating the 'Reign of Christ'—or they might be calling it a celebration of 'Christ the King'. Whatever exactly we might call it; it's not hard to understand. We believe that Christ is the King of the universe.

The Apostle Paul told the Colossian church: *'[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rules or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'*

This is quite an incredible claim, far more than any sane person would say about any earthly king. But this is the claim that Christians make, and they get it from the Bible.

It has always this way. When our ancestors, the Israelites first asked for a king, God replied to the prophet Samuel that God was already their true king, the Lord of the universe, and that they didn't need an earthly king. Earthly kings, said God through Samuel, will tax you to death, and appropriate your fields, and conscript your sons for wars, and press your daughters into work in their palaces.<sup>1</sup> And this turned out to be true.

God permitted the Israelites to have a king in spite of this future danger and all the complications that came with it.

When the Israelites began to trust in powerful kings with large palaces and enormous armies, they were always reminded by the prophets that their true king was God.

In fact, the longer they had kings, the more the Israelites longed for the true king of the universe to show up and take charge of the messes they found themselves in. So you could have seen a lot of wise head nod when Jeremiah said, as he said today: 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.' There were ready for this because by this time there were a lot of unjust and unrighteous kings and princes and judges.

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<sup>1</sup> *I Samuel* 8.10-18

And when we, as Christians, hear today the Apostle Paul say that Christ is the king of the universe, we're ready for it too! Our experience of all kinds of authority today is that it is often as cruel and unjust as the ancient Kings who did whatever they felt to those they ruled over. We're ready for Christ to take over. But it's often hard for us to see how this will happen.

When we look at the powerful Generals of Burma crushing their people in the street; when we hear about the epidemic of rape in the Congo; when we see the poorest people in the world get robbed of food by a thoughtless financial decision in New York; when we see another friend or loved one struck down by cancer and in the grip of pain—we want to cry out: 'Why doesn't Christ take over now as King?'

*I think we should take two things away with us this morning, when we have finished worshipping together. And the first is that praising Christ as the true King puts everything else in perspective.*

I found out this week something I didn't know about the psalm we have just said to each other, *Psalm 148*.

It's a beautiful Psalm of praise that by Jewish tradition was sung out by Daniel's three friends in Babylon.<sup>2</sup> But it wasn't sung out by them when the King Nebuchadnezzar selected them for important positions in his Kingdom. It was said to have been sung by them after they refused to worship the enormous, glittering, golden idol that the King erected for everyone to bow down to. It was sung by the three of them right after this verse in Daniel: 'The three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down, bound, into the furnace of blazing fire.'<sup>3</sup>

'Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens...Praise the Lord from the earth.' This psalm offers praise to the King of Heaven in a dangerous moment—*it puts everything else in perspective*. The amazing thing is that the three of them don't get around to talking about human beings 'til near the end of the psalm. And they never really mention themselves.

What they did was give a voice to all of creation, first of all the voice of the heavens—sun, moon, stars, angels. I thought about his last night, a beautiful, cold, clear night—the moon was so bright we could almost read by it. But like you, I was in a safe place. The three of them urged the skies above the fiery furnace to declare that God is king—'Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.'

And they gave a voice to the rest of creation: 'Praise the Lord from the earth—sea monsters, ocean depths—lightning and hail, snow and frost, mountains and hills,

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<sup>2</sup> It would seem to be the source of 'The Song of the Three Holy Children' (also known by various other titles) in the 'Apocrypha' of the Jewish Scriptures; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalm 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), p. 561-52.

<sup>3</sup> *Daniel 3.23*

fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and cattle, reptiles and birds. They urged them to all worship the king of creation, because God made them all and watches over them all.

And then, finally, they get to humanity: 'Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord... his glory is above heaven and earth. He has raised up a horn for his people.' In the language of their day, the 'horn' of a large beast was a sign of God's power to deliver them.

And God did deliver them—and so we have their song. But countless songs and words of praise by those who have died are just as real as this Psalm, and so is the deliverance that God will grant in God's time, for those he loves and will keep beside him forever.

*The first thing we should take away with us this morning is that praising Christ as the true King, in the company of the moon and the stars and the trees and our fellows puts everything else in perspective. We are a part of God's creation and our king will care for us as he cares for everything else he has made.*

It might be a very good thing for us this week, in the midst of our troubles or our joys to watch out for all the things that praise the Lord—and to remember to sing praises to our king in our hearts (or if we have the courage, out loud where everywhere we find ourselves!).

It might be good to let ourselves be prompted this week by the magnificence of the sea, or the mystery of the fog, the brightness of the stars, and the beauty of human life as the beginning of a moment of worship.

And it might be very good to sing these praises in our hearts exactly when we find ourselves in our own fiery furnaces this week, big or small—it might be good to memorize and repeat even one verse of this psalm:

*'Praise the Lord from the heavens...Praise the Lord from the earth...For his name alone is exalted, his glory is above heaven and earth.'* This begins to help us put everything in perspective.

*But there is a second thing we should take away with us this morning too: we Christians are the servants of Christ the king and his chosen means by which Christ's kingdom comes to others.*

At the same time the Apostle Paul told the Colossians how magnificent Christ their King really was, he said to them: 'He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

It's not that Christians can establish Christ's kingdom by joining a particular political party, or by pressuring their government to pass certain laws. But Christians, as citizens of Christ's kingdom, are the chosen means by which

Christ's kingdom is announced—through whom the world begins to feel the reign of Christ.

It doesn't always feel like it is possible! It didn't look like in the Gospel story about Christ on the cross. We heard that the soldiers mocked Jesus. We heard that the religious leaders mocked Jesus. We heard that one of the dying criminals nailed next to him mocked Jesus. And even the sign on the cross mocked Jesus—the sarcasm was thick in the words—'This is the King of the Jews.'

Yet...yet there was one worshipper, one other criminal in that story who lived to offer praise. He simply said: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And Jesus gave his word.

Christ's kingdom is built on such small things in hard and dangerous times—and that is how it will be built this week. I thought about this because of one of our parish Bible studies this month.

We were talking about how the prophets cried out for God's kingship to be made real with the way we treated other members of his kingdom. And one of our members talked about how God's kingdom edged into his workplace.

We are beginning to understand in North America and Europe how our small habits here can lift up our fellow citizens in far off countries or slam them down into the dust. So our fellow participant was keen to support an initiative in his own office. Though management supplied free coffee it was not 'fairly traded'—it didn't get here to Halifax from a distant place by giving its growers anything like the reward they needed to survive on.

So one person in his office put her own pot of one brand of 'fairly traded' coffee next to it in the office, and asked for a small contribution to cover the cost of buying it, knowing that this way the growers would be more fairly rewarded. Our fellow participant drank this coffee and contributed to its purchase and watched over the year as more and more of his fellows drank the fairly traded coffee they purchased and fewer drank the free management coffee. And finally the management got the point and said: 'Okay—we'll pay the extra for the fairly traded coffee, and offer it to you for free.'

Is this a small thing in the great scheme? Yes, but it is very real, as real as the words of the dying gasps of the crucified criminal. None of us may be Bishop Desmond Tutu, through whom God announced his kingdom to an unjust South Africa—but we all have our roles to play as citizens of Christ's kingdom. Some of these opportunities will come our way this week—let's be ready!

And now, along with the thief on the cross, he turn to Christ in the Lord's Supper, and remember that it is here that we enter together into Christ's Kingdom, before we take Christ's kingdom with us into our homes and our jobs and the rest of our lives. Amen.