

Last Sunday after Pentecost, November 25, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Revelation 1:4b-8 John 18:33-37

Like so much in the stories about Jesus, it's easy to miss what's really going on if you forget who and what, more than anyone, represents the antithesis of Jesus' message. That means missing what's going on between Jesus and Pilate. The phrase that's central is this one: "My kingdom is not of this world."

When the earliest followers of Jesus, and then the Gospel writers talked about Jesus as "Son of God", or "Lord", or "The Child Who Saved Us", they were co-opting titles already in use to describe the Emperor Caesar Augustus; when they talked about the nature of the earliest Christian communities they were co-opting descriptions – like *Ekklesia* – already in use to describe the Roman Empire.

They weren't doing this to say "Jesus is like Caesar", or "the Christian Community is like the Empire," but *the opposite*: Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't," "Christian Community is true community and the Empire isn't." And perhaps more importantly, "Christian Community is not like the Empire's version of community." Paul, in particular, made that contrast – his community was non-hierarchical, very diverse, totally inclusive; the opposite of the Roman Empire's hierarchical, non-inclusive, uniform identity.

Much of Christian history has missed that contrast; either by accident, or – in the case, for example, of the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) intentionally.

Jesus' and Paul's unique vision of that egalitarian, diverse, inclusive community didn't survive them; by the middle ages the Pope was seen as like an Emperor, and the Church like an Empire; in fact the Pope *was* an emperor, and the Church *was* an empire. Dante's *Inferno* (the first part of his *Divine Comedy*) which contained the nine circles of hell reflects that hierarchical, imperialistic vision, as does the third part of that poem, about Paradise.

One of the things that the Reformation was about was responding to that particular Christian vision by seeking to recover what the Reformers viewed as the true nature of Christian community and the true nature of the roles of leaders within that community. As we move past Thanksgiving, it's worth remembering that 2nd governor of the Plymouth Colony, and first signatory to the Mayflower Compact – William Bradford – was all about that non-hierarchical, egalitarian New Testament vision of Christian community. Over the eleven years of his governorship he sought to make the Christian New England part of European North America into that vision of community.

Since 1621 we have struggled as a nation to appreciate the meaning Bradford and his fellow pilgrims sought to introduce. We have also struggled with the forces that challenge that egalitarian vision. When some leaders seek to act like monarchs, not every American objects! When reactionary forces seek hierarchical power some Americans approve.

Our nation has in part been built on that bifurcated foundation, so it really shouldn't surprise us that we Americans seem to have a schizophrenic, split-personality when it comes to community identity!

The same is true of our Church – the Episcopal Church is a Reformation Church – which is reflected in the way we've structured our common life, and, more recently, in organizing principles like those found in the baptismal covenant; yet that split-personality is still there, the hierarchical identity is still present.

That means – for me and, I think, for you – to talk about this Sunday as “Christ the King Sunday” brings both the same seductive risks that the medieval Church succumbed to, of understanding kingship in human terms as ruling over, and Christian community being ruled,; as well as its opposite, which we find when we redefine how we understand that title – “king” – in a Christian context, in the context of the community of faith. In this sense, it's not inappropriate to use the word “kingdom” because of its role in identifying the Christian community as a contrast community.

So what are we called to be, as citizens of Jesus' kingdom? Asking that question points directly to the origins of calling this particular Sunday “Christ the King Sunday.” It was a name and a celebration instituted in 1925. In 1925 across Europe dictators were rising and – as is the case with authoritarian regimes - they were claiming to ‘corner’ morality, even if the rest of the world recognized it as a skewed moral perspective; and out of that skewed morality they sought to co-opt the Church. Exactly because of this, Pope Pius XI declared the last Sunday of the Christian year to be Christ the King Sunday – It's purpose, he said, was so “that nations would see that the Church has the right to freedom, and immunity from the state.” The Church has this right, because Christians march to the beat of a different drum, and understand kingship and citizenship differently.

The message is clear: Christian faith sees no borders, which means there are no outsiders. That's why all Christians – all Christians – are called to challenge those who claim the opposite, those who try to create a “them”, and pit us against them; to challenge those who would have us live in fear, who would seek to control who we are and what we do; who seek to treat some human beings as disposable.

That message IS the message of Jesus and Paul about the true meaning of being a monarch – one who serves, Jesus said – and the true meaning of citizenship in the community of God. May we live that meaning in our lives.