

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2009

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John 18: 33 - 38

“Christ the Relational Power of Truth and Life”

1. Do moderns relate to kingship language?

The creators of the international lectionary use the language of kingship and lordship to name this last Sunday of the many weeks of Pentecost as Christ the King or the Reign of Christ.

Malina and Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*) suggest that, “[f]or most U.S. readers of the Bible, the words king and lord are perhaps the most difficult New Testament words to appreciate.” (quotation found in: www.crossmarks.com/brian/john18x33.htm)

And yet, our novels and movies still use such imagery. The movie *Shrek* has a king in search of a princess, and a princess who yearns for rescue from loneliness and enslavement to monstrous creatures. It is an ogre, as an unlikely knight, who provides her with real salvation and future happiness.

Non-churched people in our secular and post-monarchical world do not find such language and symbolism meaningful or relevant when speaking about Christ or God. This is not a mere reactionary capriciousness on the part of our Western culture. As Malina and Rohrbaugh point out,

“Most people today simply have no experience of persons embodying these social roles, much less of the social system that supports such roles.

For pre-enlightenment people (before the eighteenth century C.E.), the king was the author and guarantor of the prosperity of his people -- if he followed the rules of justice and obeyed divine commandments. ... [The king's] proper function was to promote fertility about him, both in animals and vegetation. Kings ensured prosperity on land and sea, with abundant fruit and fecund women [able to be productive]. Thus, subjects expected peace and prosperity, security and abundance, from their kings. [pp. 364-5]

2. It is crucial to explore whether this monarchical language is adequate for faith.

Yet, we need to reflect on deeper issues. That is, is this language and imagery adequate for understanding Christ and God? Did the historical Jesus prefer this title, or did the early church favour it? Does this language actually relate to the being of God and thus to the nature of the divine and human relationship? And, if it was a preferred language and model in ancient times, are we bound to replicate it today, even if it makes no sense in a post-monarchical Western culture? What does it reveal about power, authority, truth and our individual and communal life?

Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, finds this monarchical model when applied to God inadequate and oppressive:

This imaginative picture [of God as King] is so prevalent in mainstream Christianity that it is often not recognised as a picture. Nor is it immediately perceived as oppressive. More often it is perceived as the natural understanding of God and the world-and one we like. (63)

Why is this picture of Christ and God as king so prevalent in Christianity? The Jewish crowd also forcefully prevailed upon Jesus to be their king in the days preceding this trial before Pilate. Jesus absolutely refused to become their new Davidic king. In our text, John 18: 37, Jesus says to Pilate, "You say that that I am King." He does not accept Pilate's understanding and replies that he "has come into the world not to be a king but to bear witness to the truth". (Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 853)

3. Why do we *like* to have a Christ or God as our king?

If Sally McFague is right that we Christians *like* to have a Christ or God as our king, why do we want a God like this?

Is it that we humans, as individuals and societies, ancient, medieval or postmodern, always desire to be subjects who expect peace and prosperity, security and abundance, from leaders, rulers or kings? Is it that we want a Shrek hero to rescue us from ourselves and provide salvation and future happiness? And does this mean we feel so powerless and helpless that we need a powerful monarch to help us?

Or, is it that we are uncomfortable with a God too intimate and close to us? Therefore, a removed, distant king is a safer, more comfortable prospect. Certainly, psychoanalysis teaches us that we are neither comfortable with intimacy with others nor at ease to connect deeply with our inner feelings and thoughts. Again, in the words of Sally McFague:

The relationship of a king to [one's] subjects is necessarily a distant one; royalty is "untouchable". It is the distance, the difference, and the otherness of God that is underscored in this imagery. God as king is in [a] kingdom – which is not of this earth ... In this picture God is worldless and the world is Godless: the world is empty of God's presence, for it is too lowly to be the royal abode. (64)

Slavoj Žižek's in his book *The Ticklish Subject* grapples with the monstrous and uncanny elements of life which throws institutions and societies "off the rails". He looks to enlightenment philosophy, politics and psychoanalysis in the 19th and 20th century to provide insights.

Example:

The 20th century philosopher, Martin Heidegger writes about the Monstrous, or the Uncanny, *Das Unheimliche*: what is it, he reflects, that produces the overpowering violence of nature, of earth, as well as the violence of humanity, which throws the natural course of events "off the rails" and exploits it.

He insists that this out-of-joint character of humanity, derailing persons and institutions, arises out of deep and unknown aspects of our being-ness: and, even as a deeply committed Enlightenment philosopher he turns to Ancient Greek myths about kings for insight into our present condition: kings who ruled not only their people with violence and set up inflexible laws and authoritarian societies, but allowed their most loved sons and daughters to be devoured by the monstrous Law.

Zizek informs us that these philosophers see the presence of the uncanny, that which exists outside yet influences our safe systems, laws and cultural organizations and leaderships. And, this uncanny seems to infect all of us:

- to drive some to seek power over others;
- to seduce the masses, who wish to deal with the anxiety and fear which accompanies being human, to give their life away to the powerful for security and immediate well-being.

5. Jesus is the Christ who fits no formula! You are my friends!

In our text today, we see signs that Jesus subverts the image of kingship. He adds new truth to it, in his words, presence and practice. A truth that seeks to free humans from seeking dependence and submission to a greater power, from magical rescue, dealing with the Uncanny nature of our human being-ness.

Jesus has known and refused the clamour of the crowds, in John 12, to make him king. Here is a portrait of a representative of God, not a king, but one for whom God is a loving parent, offering a place of refuge for all people who seek refuge, in particular, the lame and the outcast.

In John's Gospel, as here in Chapter 18, the term, *king of the Jews* belongs in the realm of revolt: alternative relationship, government, liberation - from the Romans.

But it is not just a liberation from the Romans that Jesus realises the crowds need. Jesus is interested in inviting people into a realm of mutual relationship and is not concerned with a kingly title. A relationship in which there will not be subjects or servants.

Raymond Brown:

"Jesus would not think of his disciples as subjects in the sense of their being his servants, for in John 15:15 he refused to call them servants. If the word 'subject' is applicable within Jesus kingdom, it has undergone as much reinterpretation as the notion of kingdom itself." (852f)

John 15: 15

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Parent".

Conclusion

"My criticism of [this monarchical model]", writes Sally McFague, "focuses on its inability to serve as the imaginative framework for an understanding of the gospel as a destabilizing, inclusive, non-hierarchical vision of the fulfillment for all creation ..." (64). Alternatively, for her, time and space are filled with God; a God intimately relating to anxious humanity, to a groaning creation.

At first sight, all this seems absent from our story today. Jesus stands before Pilate in seeming isolation. He is betrayed by his own community. The crowd who wanted him as their king, turn against him. Religious leaders conspire to kill him for fabricated reasons, and his death is certain.

Yet, the presence of God stands firm and near in this seeming absence. The truth remains that

human institutions and its leaders have abandoned truth and power which frees human beings to be truly human. God remains faithful to Jesus in this dark hour. And Jesus, a human being, is not overwhelmed by the injustice and madness of society as it betrays all of us. Even in the absence of his being saved from this he believes that the darkness of this time can never conceal the hidden presence of a God who loves this his Chosen one and through him loves each of us as a dear and precious child, as the church, society, and planet.

Bruce G. Epperly concludes his article with these words:

Jesus' vision of power encourages relationship and interdependence rather than one-sided domination. These scriptures invite us to ponder whether or not our visions of power, truth, and revelation also condition one another. They invite us to explore types of power that heal rather than destroy, include rather than exclude, and inspire rather than dominate. Power is inevitable and we must not abandon our responsibilities as agents of transformation in congregations and in the social and political order, but we must consider ways to include others in the creative use of power just as we seek to expand the circle of revelation to include others. (Bruce G. Epperly, <http://www.processandfaith.org/>)