

November 21, 2021
Reign of Christ / Christ the King Sunday

Meditation: “Not Of, But In”

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year – Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. I don't know about you, but I always thought that the Christian festivals were two thousand years old. Did you know that the date for Christmas wasn't set until the church was about 300 years old, in the year 336? And Christ the King Sunday wasn't on anybody's radar until 1925 when Pope Pius XI declared it so. It was a reaction by the church in Rome to the rise of fascism. Jesus, the Pope declared, is King, not Mussolini.

So, if Jesus is King, what is he king of? The obvious answer is a kingdom, but in his conversation with Pilate, he tells Pilate that his kingdom is not from this world. That is a really cryptic statement to make. If not from the world, then where? It made me think of Jesus' prayer for the disciples (which extends beyond the 12 to everyone who is a student of Jesus) in which he said his disciples 'did not belong' to the world, even though they were 'in the world.' The disciples, even though they are 'in the world' are called to be not of the world. What if Jesus, when he replies to Pilate, is really saying his kingdom is not of this world, or does not belong to this world?

What are the kingdoms of this world like? The kingdoms or nation-states of this world favour the wealthy and politically well-connected. They are the ones the laws and rules support. They are the ones who benefit from the economic and justice systems. They are the ones who control the military and police, who are instruments used to enforce the laws of the kingdom or nation-state, and the world around them. Force, violent force if necessary, is used to keep the elite in control of the system.

When Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not from or of this world, what he is saying is that his kingdom does not operate by the rules that the kingdoms of the world operate by. If his kingdom did operate by the same set of rules, there would be armed militants attacking the Roman fortress, Antonia, within Jerusalem to liberate Jesus from Roman detention..... because that is what the Romans would do if the Jews detained Pilate or Caesar.

Does this make sense? Okay, so if Jesus' kingdom doesn't operate the way that the kingdoms or nation-states of this world operate, just how does it operate?

Jesus' kingdom operates on the basis of love, compassion, mercy, and distributive justice. Jesus' kingdom operates on the basis of fairness for all. In Jesus' kingdom there is no racism, or sexism, or ageism, or ableism, or any other ism you can think of. This is the kingdom we are called, as disciples, to make a reality 'on earth as in heaven.' Living according to the operational rules of Jesus' kingdom is what Christianity is. Easy peasy – right?

How are we supposed to live like that, when we live in a world that operates by a different set of rules? That's what is meant by living in this world but not being of this world, or living in this world but not belonging to this world. Allow me to give you a couple of examples of how we might do this.

Anyone ever heard of Amnesty International? What do they do? Right, they petition governments to uphold human rights. They fight against the detention, torture, or killing of people who are deemed enemies of the state – in other words, political opponents. One way they do this work is by educating people of human rights abuses around the world. They also launch mass letter-writing campaigns to the governments who commit human rights abuses. They work for justice, not retributive justice, which seeks to punish, but distributive justice, which seeks fairness for all.

How about Indwell – surely you've all heard about them? Their mission statement says: "Our mission is to create affordable housing communities that support people seeking health, wellness, and belonging." They do more than simply provide affordable housing. They also make sure there are supports for people living with addiction and/or mental health issues. They say, "Christ calls us to help others find community as well as stable housing." Again, they work for distributive justice and community.

In the work of these two organizations we see, as someone once said, that "the kingdom of God has come near." Charity is all well and good, but it does nothing to address the inequities built into human systems that are the reason charity is necessary in the first place. Charity, without the work of righting the inequities, simply serves to enable the systems that are the problem. To make the kingdom of God a reality here and now, we need to fix the inequities built into the systems. That is the work of social justice. That is the work that this denomination was founded on.

In the lesson, Jesus lays out two ways of living. We can live according to the rules of the world – the rules of human systems that elevate some at the expense of many – or we can live according to the rules of the kingdom of God – rules that ensure each person has the things they need to reach their full potential and to thrive. Jesus was telling Pilate that he was living according to the latter – his kingdom was not of/from this world. The question is, which set of rules will we live by? Which kingdom do we serve? When we live according to the rules of love, compassion, mercy, and divine justice, the kingdom of God comes near, and we live as kings and queens. May it be so. Amen.