

25 November 2018

Metaphors and Muddles: The Warm and Fuzzy Kin-dom

John 18:33-38

For someone who never acted like a king, Jesus sure got saddled with a lot of kingly expectations. Even Pontius Pilate, representative of the greatest sovereign in the world at the time, was curious about Jesus' claims to kingship. We read this curious exchange between Jesus and Pilate in John chapter 18, verses 33 to 38:

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' ³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' ³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Today, in the liturgical calendar of the Christian church, is "Christ the King" Sunday. It is a day for celebrating Christ's sovereignty over us now, and over all creation one day. It's the final Sunday of the liturgical year; next week we start a new year with the first Sunday of Advent. But you may be forgiven if you've never heard of Christ the King Sunday. It tends to get lost here in America. For starters, it is often the Sunday before Thanksgiving, which is a *much* bigger deal to us, and so Christ the King disappears in sermons on being grateful. And if it comes after Thanksgiving, as it does this year, we're already started on the Christmas rush, without which, apparently, our economy and way of life would collapse.

But the calendar isn't the only reason this feast day tends to be pushed to the back of the cupboard. Part of it is that the metaphor of Christ as *king* sounds so sexist. Kingship is the ultimate expression of patriarchy, and the argument is made that the Church has for far too long defined God as exclusively male and Christ's church in exclusively masculine terms: as a conquering empire, for instance ("Onward, Christian Soldiers," anyone?), or more recently as a multinational corporation, seeking to increase its global market share. Instead of such predominantly male images for the Church, we should offer more relational metaphors, like a family or a community. So, many have sought to "de-patriarchalize" God and the Church, first by avoiding gender-specific pronouns referring to God, and then by removing the language of "king" and "kingdom." For instance, some have started to refer to the "Kingdom of God" as the "KIN-dom of God." Get it? You just drop the G. And most now call this day the "Reign of Christ" Sunday, rather than "Christ the King," which removes the word "king" entirely. Except, of course, that our English word "reign" comes from the Latin *regnum*, which is form of the Latin *rex*, which means "king." Still, "Reign of Christ" *feels* less patriarchal.

I'm going to step aside from the sermon for a minute now. In our highly-charged and deeply-divided culture, much of the division revolves around gender politics. It is possible that some of you have strong feelings about the use of masculine language and metaphors for God. So, let me not just slide over this question, but take a moment with it. How do we speak of God?

First, can we agree that God is neither male nor female? Our understanding of the difference between those two genders has to do with specific chromosomal structures and

specific body parts. God has neither. However, if we want to use a pronoun to refer to God, our language has only three options: he, she, and it – and we will not use *it* to refer to God. God is not an object but is the ultimate subject. So, we're left with *him* or *her*. Now, Jesus the Son is easy. When he was on earth was definitely male, so even though Christ is no longer in that fleshly state, it seems simplest to continue to refer to Jesus as *him*. Now, what about God? Well, the Bible consistently uses masculine pronouns for God, and the most common metaphor for God is that of Father. At the same time, though, the Bible explicitly says God is Spirit (beyond physical form) and also uses maternal imagery for God. (One possible translation of the obscure Hebrew title *El-Shaddai* is “God of the Breasts.”) So, it's not that easy.

Here's where I am on the issue, until I change my mind again. I refer to Jesus as *he* and *him*. I also don't “correct” the masculine pronouns of scripture when they refer to God: I read the words as they are written. When I speak of God I try to avoid using pronouns at all, as awkward as that can be, but I don't sweat it when others choose to follow the practice of scripture and refer to God with masculine pronouns. Just one thing, though. If you choose to follow the model of scripture, make sure that you also refer to the Holy Spirit as *she* and *her*, because the original languages of the Bible never refer to the Spirit of God as masculine. The Hebrew of Genesis 1:2, for instance, literally says “the Spirit of God, *she* brooded over the face of the waters.” So, within the Three-in-One God, we have both male and female. The pronoun you choose to use is entirely up to you. Neither is accurate; neither is wrong. Just not *it*.

I now return you to your regularly scheduled sermon, which – if you'll think back – was about “Christ the King.” As I was saying, sometimes that traditional term is dropped because it feels sexist. But there's still another reason that title is avoided: more and more people are uncomfortable with the whole idea of a *ruling* God. “King” doesn't just sound sexist; it sounds autocratic and bossy and interfering. Many of us prefer affirming, encouraging, supportive metaphors for God. All that authority-figure stuff feels medieval; we'd rather have a God who makes suggestions rather than issues edicts, whose concern is our own self-actualization, becoming our Best Selves Now, rather than our obedience. And it's worth noting that that new expression I mentioned earlier – “The Kin-dom of God” – works admirably in this regard as well. Dropping that G doesn't just remove sexist language, but also all trace of authority. God isn't king; God is family.

So, there are a lot of reasons that a lot of people ignore “Christ the King” Sunday. Just one problem: ignoring the ideas of the Kingdom of God and Christ the King requires that we also ignore an awful lot of scripture. Because, among biblical metaphors, those are some of the most frequent, as in the passage we just read:

[Pilate] asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ ³⁴*Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’* ³⁵*Pilate replied, ‘I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’* ³⁶*Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’* ³⁷*Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’*

Yes, Jesus is king. He claimed the title himself – reluctantly, to be sure, but that was probably because Pilate, an official of the world's most powerful king, didn't have a prayer of understanding what Jesus actually meant by the word. Pilate would think of *kingship* as a position of absolute, autocratic power. But when Jesus finally accepts the term *king* for himself,

he specifies that his kingdom is not of this world – nor, presumably, in any way like the kingdoms of this world.

Which is what he had been telling people his entire ministry! “The kingdom of God is like yeast” – invisible, but changing everything it touches. It’s like a mustard seed – insignificant in appearance, but offering shelter to the world. Jesus told his disciples, “the rulers of this world lord it over their subjects, but you shall not be like that. If you want to be first, be the servant of all.” He told them that he had come not to be served, but to serve others. And, back to our reading in John, he tells Pilate, *“You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”* The currency of Christ’s kingdom is not power, but truth.

Sometimes when you examine an issue that people argue about, you discover that the controversy is not so much about the issue as it is about the people fighting over it. The people who dislike the term “Christ the King,” finding it sexist and patriarchal and autocratic, are apparently not paying attention to how Jesus himself defined his kingdom. As he describes it, the Kingdom of God will be none of those things, and Christ the King demonstrated his authority not by wielding it over others but by giving it up to demonstrate love to others. And in *this* kingdom, that self-giving love is exactly what gives authority. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3, Christ emptied himself for us, even to the point of death, “therefore, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

I’ve got no problem with saying “Reign of Christ,” instead of “Christ the King,” but can we not do “Kin-dom”? Can we not smooth over the reign of Christ entirely, replacing it with warm and fuzzy images of an encouraging uncle, cheering for us in the background? The Bible has many metaphors describing God’s comfort and encouragement; we don’t have to invent new ones. And we definitely should not conceal the fact that Christ does not always speak in whispered suggestion. Sometimes Christ speaks in words of command. Like when he commands us to love our enemies, even when they strike us in the face or take our possessions. Like when he commands us to forgive those who persecute us, to care for the weak, to put others’ needs before our own, to be a servant to all, to put following Christ above father and mother and wife and sister and brother, to forgive until we’ve lost count of how many times we’ve forgiven. These are not suggestions! These are royal commands, expressing a different sort of kingdom than any we’ve ever seen, coming from one who earned the right to give them by demonstrating every one: Christ the King.

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So, Christ is king, but of a different kind of kingdom. And here is the amazing thing about Christ’s kind of kingship. For those who have the tendency to think highly of themselves and their own authority, that reign is a source of humility, bowing our heads before Christ’s majesty. But for those who have been beaten down their whole lives, by circumstances or abuse or the cruelty of others, this king reaches down and raises them up to their feet, saying, “Rise my daughter, rise my son. You shall reign with me.” Amen.