

Sermon for Sunday, November 25, 2018 - Christ the King

Scripture for the Day:

[Daniel 7:9 - 10, 13 - 14](#); [Revelation 1:4b - 8](#); [John 18:33 - 37](#)

In the spring of 1934, a group of rebellious pastors convened a synod at a church in Barmen, Germany to declare that the German protestant church was not “an organ of the state,” adopting the characteristics, tasks, and dignity of the State. They also rejected the false doctrine that the State “should become the single and totalitarian order of human life,” as though humans were subject to the Nazi Party first and God second. It rejected the notion that the church should look beyond the Word of God to earthly powers as a source of proclamation. It rejected the attempts by Hitler and the Nazi Party to put the Word and work of the Lord in service to their political and ideological goals. In short, the Barmen Declaration¹ rejected Nazi interference in church affairs, and confessed God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the ruler of the church and all people.

The Barmen Declaration more or less established what would become known as the Confessing Church, which stood in opposition to Hitler’s national church. When the Nazis came to power, they attempted to “consolidate” German protestant churches into a single German Evangelical Church. While some pastors could see a benefit administratively, it soon became apparent that there were other goals for this church that served Nazi ideology. Member churches were to adopt the “Aryan paragraph,” a paragraph which changed the definition of baptism and excluded from its benefits any individuals with Jewish heritage. Hitler also proposed to remove the Old Testament from the Bible; to expel pastors who were not Nazi sympathizers, who were of Jewish descent, or who were married to someone of Jewish descent; and to expel people of Jewish descent from the churches and relegate them to separate churches. Initially concerned only with maintaining independence, the leaders of the Confessing Church increasingly spoke out against the Nazi doctrine, which founded a faith based on race

¹ "The Theological Declaration of Barmen - Sacred Texts." <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2018.

and national identity, not in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Barmen Declaration was a response to a moment in time when Nationalist fervor was sweeping Germany, and Hitler had achieved demigod status among his followers.

Less than a decade before the Barmen Declaration, Pope Pius XI inaugurated the Feast of Christ the King². Alarmed by the rise of nationalism and secularism in Europe, and concerned that people were turning from God to place their faith in the State, he established this feast day to remind Christians to whom they belong. As we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, we reaffirm our confession that Jesus Christ is the ruler of all rulers. Today we declare that no kingdom or empire, no leader or party, no president, prime minister, or dictator, no congress or parliament, no power on earth has power over Jesus Christ. Today we declare our loyalty to the one king to whom we are truly subjects, in this life and the next, and make a commitment to serve him in all things.

The readings appointed for this Christ the King Sunday help us to understand what kind of king we serve, what his kingdom looks like, and how we should serve him.

Revelation begins by bringing greetings from the Almighty God, the one who is and who was and who is to come. This God is served by a complete contingent of spirits, and holds all time in God's divine hands. Daniel calls God "the Ancient One," another signal to us that God is the beginning and end of all time. So the first thing we learn about our King is that his reign is eternal.

Revelation next brings greetings from Jesus Christ, the "faithful witness." The God who transcends time and space sent Jesus Christ into our limited reality to bear witness to the Truth of God's unending love for us and the coming of God's kingdom. As a faithful witness, Jesus lived and moved among us as a teacher and model of sacrificial service, even to his death. As the "firstborn of the dead," Jesus overcame that death to free us from our sin and to assume his rightful place at the right hand of God. As "ruler of the kings of the earth," he has ultimate authority over all of creation,

² "Quas Primas (December 11, 1925) | PIUS XI." http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html. Accessed 19 Nov. 2018.

including all man-made political structures. Rather than accepting the earthly kingship his followers wished for - and that the religious aristocracy accused him of - Jesus made *us* into a kingdom that is limited neither by political or geographical borders, nor by the length of human life. No matter how toxic our human forms of government become, they are ultimately subject to Christ the King, from whom we can never be separated.

So what is this kingdom *like*? We know it's not like any kingdom or empire we know from human history. The [verses immediately preceding today's Daniel text](#) compare earthly empires to terrible beasts, which devour flesh with gruesome fangs and crush all things under their giant feet. In these verses we read today, God stands in judgement over these empires, destroys them, and establishes a new kingdom with "one like a human being" as its king. It is important for us to remember that Daniel would not have been thinking of Jesus as he interpreted this vision. It is, in its own right, a powerful promise that God will deal justly with those empires which devour and degrade human life. And unlike these human empires, which rise and fall, God's kingdom is eternal.

In the climactic scene between Jesus and Pilate, Jesus declares, "My kingdom is not from this world." If it were, he points out, he would not even be standing before Pilate. His followers - a better translation might be foot-soldiers or posse - would have fought to keep him safe so he could assume power. Unlike the Pharisees who brought a band of soldiers to the garden to arrest Jesus, or the Roman Emperors who expanded the empire through military domination, Jesus' kingdom is marked by peace and justice. Jesus' kingdom expanded to encompass all peoples, nations, and languages through God's gracious action, not through violence. Shaped by God's love, the kingdom is just and peaceful, not subject to changing ideologies, and everlasting.

So what does it mean for us to be subjects in Christ's kingdom? How do we serve our king? Jesus tells Pilate that all those who belong to the truth listen to the voice of Jesus. We are to follow the example that Jesus set for us. Just as Jesus was a faithful witness, we are to testify to the love of God by serving people living on the margins of our communities. As we already do as a church, it means feeding the

hungry, and offering relationship and hospitality to everyone we meet. For Abiding Savior, it may mean continuing the process to become a Reconciled in Christ church, so that your welcome can also formally include our LGBTQ siblings in the kingdom.

Belonging to a kingdom that is not of this world brings with it the temptation to separate ourselves from this world. Indeed, some churches do just that. They set impossible standards for those who are “in,” cast judgement on those who are “out,” and keep the world beyond their church walls at arm’s length, to avoid becoming “corrupted” before Christ returns.

But no matter how broken the world has become, God does not keep *us* at arm’s length. God’s kingdom is come already! In addition to being just, peaceful, and eternal, God’s kingdom is marked by renewal. God is already making things new. Jesus already defeated death to bring about new life. Recovery from addiction, repaired relationships, peace in the face of death, acts of forgiveness, inspired new ministries, compassion after disasters, protest against injustice - these are all signs of God’s renewing action in the world right now. The kingdom to which we belong is not only a future reality that we hope for; it is breaking into our world even now. Jesus does not need his subjects to be perfectly preserved specimens of saintliness. Our King requires that we participate in his work of renewal, to dig in up to our elbows, and immerse ourselves in the messiness of the world.

Belonging to truth and being a faithful witness means engaging with the world in which we live, speaking God’s truth into it. There will be times when, like the protest pastors of the Confessing church, that will mean standing against empires which make claims on our souls.

On Friday, Pastor May of CityWell United Methodist church and about two dozen supporters were arrested protesting the arrest of Samuel Oliver-Bruno by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.³ CityWell has been giving sanctuary to Samuel for nearly a year while he was searching for a way to stay in the country legally. By offering sanctuary, the church made a decision to stand in opposition to a system that tears

³ "Undocumented immigrant arrested after Durham ... - News & Observer." 23 Nov. 2018, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article222024860.html>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2018.

apart and devours people just as surely as the apocalyptic beasts in Daniel. Belonging to the Truth, they testified to the truth of God's love through action. They rejected the false doctrine that immigrant families don't matter.

This is our responsibility as subjects of Christ our King. We have been made into a kingdom that transcends time and political divisions in order to serve God alone. This does not mean divorcing ourselves from the world, but rather bearing faithful witness to God's love and engaging in God's transformative work in all that we do - at our jobs, in our families, with our friends, and as a church. As toxic ideologies consume our nations, we are called to witness to Christ our King, whose authority is ultimate, whose Truth is eternal, and whose reign of justice and peace can never be destroyed. Our loyalty is to *this* King: the one who is, and who was and who is to come. Amen.