The King of Kings

November 26th, 2017

Christ the King Sunday

In the Gospels, there are three vivid pictures of Jesus as a king. The first is when the three magi, often referred to as the three kings, present the infant Jesus with the royal gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:9-12). The second is in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11). The third, is when Pontius Pilate declares Jesus to be the king of the Jews—first during the trial, and then in the superscription nailed to the cross (Matthew 27:11; 27:37). The first and last depictions are when human beings are at their most vulnerable—infancy and the hour of death. The second is so humble and rustic as to be enigmatic. It belongs in a humble folktale or in the history of the peasantry. That immediately should signal to us something of the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. As Paul wrote, the folly of God is greater than our wisdom; the weakness of God is greater than our strength. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the King of Kings is passive, powerless, and ineffectual, a quaint but obsolete icon of the past. On the contrary, Paul writes in our lectionary reading from Ephesians today: "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:20-23). The Gospels are the story of the coronation—the story of the reign has not been completed yet, but continues today. Christ reigns in heaven over all that God has created, and Christ should reign in our hearts and lives.

The kingdom of God is among us and within us (Luke 17:21). To have Christ as your king is to have a compass for the geography of life. I would venture to say that without Christ, we do not really know the world or what is happening in it. As a child, I often played on the shores of Lake Shikotsu in Hokkaido. It was a beautiful, large lake of placid, silver water, often dotted with circles from rain drops. On clear days you could see Mount Tarumae from one shore and Mount Eniwa and Mount Yotei from the others. It was surrounded by beautiful groves of maple, birch, and larch that I wandered through on holidays. It possessed some of the key topography of the magical kingdom of early childhood. Thus, I figured I may as well use it to speak of our greater kingdom. For example, I never knew, as a child, that the lake was full of red salmon introduced from Lake Akan in 1895. I did not know that it was the second largest lake in Japan. I never knew that it has a depth of 1,200 feet. Because of its depth, it has ¾ of the water volume of Japan's largest lake, Lake Biwa. It is the 34th deepest lake in the world. For reference, the maximum depth of the Sea of Galilee is about 141 feet; even Cultus Lake has a maximum depth of 137 feet. Of our Great Lakes, only Lake Superior, at 1,333 feet is deeper than Shikotsu. I never would have imagined any of this as I played along its shores as a child. It is the same way with the world. No matter how many headlines we read, how many textbooks we consume, or informative podcasts we watch—we are often still gazing at the surface phenomena, even with things we think we are fairly familiar with. In Christ, we are able to see into the deep things, the things of the spirit (1 Corinthians 2). The kingship of Christ is the centre of our spiritual orientation and navigation. It is to know where your home is. Are we at home in Christ and His kingdom today? Or are we a little lost? Paul wrote to many different people—Romans, Ephesians, Galatians, Colossians, Thessalonians. And within these various cities of the Roman Empire there were Syrians, Jews, Arabs, Scythians, Persians, Libyans, Egyptians, Thracians, Phrygians, Illyrians, Spaniards, Romans, Gauls, Britons, Germans, Numidians, Carthaginians, Macedonians, Greeks. All of them had their physical homes and climates that they loved—their magical personal kingdoms, their individual cities (*polis*) and their respective politics and cultures to which Paul addressed his letters. And yet all of them who came to know Christ through the apostles shared a better city with foundations (Hebrews 11), a common home in the courts of God's counsel and grace, an eternal home. It is good for us to reflect for a moment on what we share with various believers around the world and what power there is in that bond. It is a worldwide, universal network of living for what is good. Ignatius of Loyola speaks of the vastness of the kingdom of Christ in his 143rd to 146th annotations of the *Spiritual Exercises*: "Gaze in imagination on the supreme and true leader, who is Christ our Lord. Consider how Christ our Lord takes his place in that great plain near Jerusalem, in an area which is lowly, beautiful, and attractive. Consider how the Lord of all the world chooses so many persons, apostles, disciples, and the like. He sends them throughout the whole world, to spread his doctrine among people of every state and condition. Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he is sending on this expedition. He recommends that they endeavor to aid all persons, by attracting them, first, to the highest degree of spiritual poverty" (Ignatius of Loyola. *Spiritual Exercises.* Ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. New York: Paulist Press, 1991. 155). Ignatius invites us to behold the good that Christ is sending into the world—all of those apostles and disciples—most of whom we have never met and never will—all of those servants keen to share themselves and their spiritual poverty. It is, in the words of Ignatius, an *expedition.* It is the greatest expedition of all time, and you have been invited to take part, to bear your light and the goodness of Christ into the world.

It is easy to look at the state of the world and only see trauma or distress. At times it looks as if the state could crumble. And sometimes states do crumble—in political science and history, these are called rogue states and failed states. In antiquity, there was a different view. Cicero once wrote that a state ceases to exist when virtue has vanished from the land. The infrastructure might still be working, the baths still filled with water, the roads in good shape, the people still gifted with bread and circuses, café lattes and television shows, but the decay has already set in because a strong community is defined by the virtues that bind its people together. These virtues are the real state. Those who dwell in the city of God, in the kingdom of heaven, have an inexhaustible resource of virtue in Christ their king, who imparts to us his own wisdom and counsel, his own holiness and righteousness, and more importantly, his loving mercy to overcome our shortcomings, in a kingdom that has no end. This is the beautiful inheritance that Christ won for us on Calvary; or as Paul writes: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:11-14). These are words I repeat, more or less, every Sunday after our prayer of confession. They are the words of hope. James C. Howell, a United Methodist minister who teaches at Duke Divinity School, writes: "Hope, for Paul, isn’t a spiritual attitude. Markus Barth, in his massive and rich Anchor Bible commentary, explains: 'When Ephesians speaks of hope, the emphasis lies not so much on the mood of the person hoping as on the substance or subject matter of expectation. Hope is equated with the thing hoped for.'" (https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8608/weekly-preaching-christ-the-king-sunday). I believe it is both an attitude and a spiritual reality, interlocking parts of one maximum reality in Jesus.

Like the bottom of Lake Shikotsu, we do not see our hope, for hope that is seen is not hope at all (Romans 8:24), but it is nonetheless a living reality that should fill our minds and our hearts each day as we live to the next day. Nobody in their right mind would deny that lakes have floors and curious items and creatures inhabiting them. They have secret histories. It was not until I was about fifteen that I learned that Lake Shikotsu was a possible site of the indigenous Ainu people's great epic—the story of Pon-Oaynurushiku, an orphan who lived with his sister and an old medicine woman, and it was Pon who hunted the great Amemasu—a giant salmonid or whale that dwelled in the lake (the dwelling place of the Amemasu is often attributed to Lake Mashu, but I at the time I heard of a version located in Shikotsu) and caused earthquakes and volcanoes. One never knows what really lives and moves in the depths of life unless one dives into it.

One of the realities of hope is the life of prayer. And in Ephesians, we get to see something of Paul's personal prayer life. He says: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power" (Ephesians 1:15-19). Our church bulletin usually has a prayer list. This is what we pray for as a community. It is good to also have your own personal prayer list. Fill it with individual names of real people. They have real lives and real problems just as you and I do, so let us be real in our prayers. I imagine the apostle's prayer list was fairly long. When you read the last chapters of his epistles, what do you encounter? Strings of names, one after the other. And often references to where they are or what they are involved in. The apostle paid attention to what was going on in the lives of his sheep. And he asked the sheep for their prayers as well. And time and again, Paul asks for the people to be blessed. This is his attitude towards all people. Paul knew what it was like to be a fanatic, to be passionate about a cause, to take any measure necessary to serve that cause, even if it was wrecking lives or hurting women and children, even if it was against the King of Kings. After Damascus, the way Paul acted was quite different. The action was passionate, yes, but it was no longer blinded by an idea or his own agenda. It was a humble passion full of care for other human beings, no matter what side of the political spectrum they came from, no matter what their religious background was, no matter what their vocation or station in life was—Greeks and Jews, Romans and Scythians, slave and freemen, even the members of Caesar's household—but he called all to serve Christ, to be blessed by Christ, to be brought into the geography of the kingdom of heaven. When you are able to say to someone, "I remember you in my prayers"—you have already taken a new path and stepped into new territory. To return to James C. Howell—he says: "St. Francis of Assisi came to be St. Francis because he prayed a single prayer, over and over, day after day, while kneeling before a crucifix in the small, crumbling church San Damiano: *Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me, Lord, correct faith, firm hope, perfect charity, wisdom and perception, that I may do what is truly your most holy will.*" I want to pray this prayer. I want the eyes of my heart to be enlightened. I want to grow in my faith, charity, wisdom and perception so that I can seek first the Kingdom and its righteousness, and thereby seek the King. And similarly, Paul asks the Ephesians to be blessed with a spirit of wisdom and revelation with the eyes of the heart enlightened so that they would know something. What were they to know? They were to know the hope they were called to, the riches of their glorious inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power for those who believe. To bless someone in this way is to start to see below the ripples on the surface of the lake, to start to see the mystery beneath, to step inside the Kingdom of God and know and serve more the King of Kings.

Benediction

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,

since as members of one body you were called to peace.

And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;

teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;

and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms

and hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed,

do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,

giving thanks to God the Father through him

Amen.