

Christ the King

Christ the King Sunday – November 21, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Jeremiah 23:5-6

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.

¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself
all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Who is Jesus?

I recently wrapped up my fall Bible Academy class on world religions, *From Buddhism to Mormonism: What Christianity is not!*. All “world religions” classes are fraught with peril. A religion, whether it be Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, is a way of life. How much can we understand about Hinduism unless we’ve lived it? Nonetheless, we live and work with people who have very different notions of reality and god (or gods) from our own. Sincerely seeking to understand one another even while acknowledging our limitations can only be good. Every person is our neighbor.

Even in our eight week “sampler platter” approach to major world religions, we saw that the question that sets apart Christianity is simple: Who is Jesus? For example, two-thirds of our Bible and much of what we proclaim about God and creation we inherited from the Jews. Yet, the followers of Jesus quickly separated themselves from the bulk of the Jews over the question of Jesus.

A Christ Hymn

If you look up today’s passage from Colossians in your pew Bible, you’ll see that I’ve rendered verses 15-20 somewhat differently than did the NRSV translators. I’ve written it out in the form of a poem or hymn. Why?

In the years after Jesus, his first followers struggled to understand what they had witnessed or had been told. They tried to make sense of Jesus’ teachings, actions, crucifixion, and resurrection. What did it all mean? Who was (is!) Jesus?

Our earliest peeks into these struggles are found in Paul’s letters which are the oldest writings in the NT. In them, we witness many arguments around the shaping of Christianity. Some of Paul’s letters were written no later than 20 years or so after Jesus’ resurrection.

Even within Paul’s letters, there are still older hymns and creed-like passages. The “Christ Hymn” of Phil. 2:6-11 is one and is presented in poetic form in most translations. In 1 Cor. 11:23-26, Paul explicitly passes on the tradition about the Lord’s supper that was given to him by others. And in Colossians 1:15-20, we have another of Paul’s hymns. Its language and structure suggest that Paul has incorporated an early Christian hymn. We can be sure of the passage’s power, which is easier to appreciate when written out as a poem. I urge you to read it aloud as a poem and a proclamation of the supremacy of Christ.

As Rabbi Jacob Nuesner recently put it, for two thousand years Jews and Christians have been “different people talking about different things to different people.”¹ And at the center of that difference sits Jesus. Likewise, William Willimon, a newly-elected UMC bishop, reflecting upon Christianity and Islam, wrote: “True, both faiths talk “love,” “peace,” “justice,” but once again we have remarkably different ways of defining or obtaining love, peace, and justice – so different that, well, it’s almost as if we were worshiping a different God.”² And who do Christians claim taught us the truth about love, peace, and justice – Jesus. So . . . who is Jesus?

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”

Christianity is about Jesus Christ – pure and simple; there can be no more and we should certainly never settle for less. We are disciples, apprentices, of Jesus. How do we seek to live? In the imitation of Jesus. In whom do we place our unrestrained trust? In Jesus. Who teaches us about love, power, possessions, and commitment? Jesus. Who has reconciled us with God? Jesus.

“a righteous Branch”

Today is “Christ the King” Sunday on the church calendar, the final Sunday before Advent.

The passage from Jeremiah reminds us that centuries before Jesus’ birth, God promised that one day, he would raise up a king from the house of David who would restore Israel and rule the land with justice and righteousness.

This king would be anointed as all kings of Israel were. Thus, the Jews came to speak of this coming king and rescuer as the “anointed one” or *masiah* in Hebrew and *christos* in Greek.

To claim that Jesus was this long-awaited King, this Messiah, was not to claim that Jesus was divine. “Messiah” was a royal term, unrelated to deity. The Jews of Jesus’ day awaited the arrival of a human king who would be raised up by God to restore Israel and free them from their Roman oppressors. This Messiah would usher in God’s kingdom and serve as a sort of vice-regent under God’s rule.

When the Romans hung the sign reading “King of the Jews” on the cross above Jesus, they meant it as mockery but it carried truth that probably escaped even the Jews, for they expected a human king like their idealized King David. But earlier in Israel’s history, they did not have a human king. Their king was God! The early Christians came to understand that their proclamations of Jesus as Messiah *and* God brought back together what had been separated. Jesus was King, Lord, and Savior. In the beginning he was with God and was God (John 1:1). In Jesus, the Father had put all things right.

Similarly, today’s hymn from Colossians, is all about the centrality and supremacy of Christ. Other religions and philosophies might try to make Jesus out to be no more than a wise teacher, a prophet, or some sort of ascendant master. But to all those, Paul stands and says no, no, no – Jesus is the “image of the invisible God,” *all* things, whether in heaven or on earth, were created in Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus. He is “before all things and in him all things hold together.” Through Jesus, and specifically through his death on the cross, God has made peace with everyone and everything. In Jesus dwells all the fullness of God! Here lies the great Christian proclamation: when we look at Jesus, we are looking at the one true God himself! The early Christians worshiped Jesus as Lord and Savior, just as, for centuries, Jews had worshiped Yahweh as Lord and Savior.

“Joyfully giving thanks”

Paul’s Christ Hymn of verses 15-20 explain the thanksgiving that precedes. Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae will learn to be grateful, “joyfully giving thanks to the Father.” Indeed, joyful thanks is the only proper or sensible or conceivable response to the vastness of Jesus and the peace made through the “blood of his cross.” How could we be anything other than grateful? The Father has rescued us and “transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.” It is in Jesus that our sins have been forgiven and that we have been reconciled to God.

It is as if Paul says, understand who God really is, understand the sheer enormity of Christ and you will be grateful – how could you be anything else. As Tom Wright puts it, if we are not thankful, it is because we have forgotten who God really is.

¹from Rabbi Nuesner’s book, *Jews and Christians: The myth of a common tradition*, Wipf and Stock, 1991.

²from Willimon’s essay, “Arguing with Muslims: God-talk on campus,” in *The Christian Century*, November 16, 2004. If this article goes on-line, I’ll link to it on my blog: www.scottengle.blogspot.com. It would surprise you and perhaps even trouble you a bit.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Christ the King)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Zechariah 9:9-17 The arrival of God's king.</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 19:28-40 Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt as the entering king</p>
<p>Day 3 Isaiah 9:1-7 God will bring a Prince of Peace who will uphold David's throne</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 1:26-38 An angel visits Mary to tell her that she will bear a son to whom God will give the throne of David.</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 19:11-16 The rider on the white horse, the King of kings</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Want to learn more about the Bible??

We have an ever-growing assortment of resources that you might find helpful. Here is an overview:

www.standrewccl.org

All the weekly Background Studies (about 120 now!) are archived here and are listed in reverse chronological order. You can use the "find" function in Internet Explorer to search for studies on specific Bible passages. Developing a Keyword index for the studies is on our to-do list!

Overheads and worksheets for ten Bible Academy courses are at this site, ranging from *Introducing the Bible* to *From Buddhism to Mormonism*. You can reach these by clicking "materials for Scott's classes" on the Welcome page or the Bible Academy page.

All my book recommendations are here, as well as some recommended links to other sites.

www.scottengle.blogspot.com

My blog is up and going and I've gotten some encouraging feedback on it. I try to post information and links that you will find helpful, interesting, and occasionally fun.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christ the King. We often use royal language when we speak of Jesus - King, Prince of Peace, King of kings, Sovereign, Lord - but do we really consider what it means? You might begin by discussing what kings are and what kings do. What makes a good king? Or a bad king? When we speak of a king's power, how far does it extend? Certainly, *authority* is basic to our notions of kingship. Kings get the last say. What does it mean to speak of Jesus' authority over us, his subjects (to stay in the kingly language)? What sort of authority does Jesus exercise? Over what portions of our lives? What are our responsibilities as Jesus' subjects? Does this language seem appealing to you? If not, why not?
2. The content of the Christ Hymn from Colossians (v. 15-20) is staggering, but I wonder how much it actually staggers us! How can we read such a passage and truly embrace, intellectually and emotionally, the immensity of its claims? A man who died in humiliation upon a Roman cross is the image of the invisible God. All things were created in him, through him, and for him. He is before all things. . . . How could this be!? This is about far more than my inner peace or the forgiveness of my sins. This is a cosmic story. What are some steps we could take to reconnect with the sheer enormity of Jesus Christ?