

**DATE:** November 25, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Reign of Christ

**SERMON:** Four “R’s” of Christ’s Reign

**TEXT:** Colossians 1:9-20; Luke 23: 26, 32-38

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In one of Len Deighton’s novels, he has a scene set in the room in the White House, where the President receives his Daily Intelligence Briefing on the current state of the world. The table where the President and his closest advisors sit is laid with fine china, and an abundant breakfast of eggs and bacon and various pastries and orange juice and coffee. Around the edges of the room, where the less important advisors sit, there is no food, just thermoses of coffee with styrofoam cups for the people to drink from. The most powerful man in the room other than the president is his personal assistant, because he has immediate access to the President all the time. And access, as we all know, is power. Everyone present watches to see whether the President’s assistant will eat the food or drink the coffee. If he does, then others can feel free to eat also. But if he doesn’t, then no one, from the National Security Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs dares to eat either, because it might be perceived as a sign of independence or rebellion. And because the President’s assistant enjoys the godlike feeling his power gives him, he almost never eats during the meeting so he can watch members of the President’s cabinet or his other advisors suppress their own desire to eat. And after the meeting is over, all the uneaten food is simply thrown in the garbage. And no one questions this: it’s the way it is with royalty, whether the sort that actually has the name of king or the sort that is democratically elected and called a president. Power is power, and it flows downward from the top. That’s the way the world works, isn’t it? Probably always has.

Institutions and societies, in our experience, simply do not work very well if the way power flows is not well-defined, either by the members of that society or organization or by someone or some group strong enough to impose

their will on everyone else. The operative phrase in that statement is “in our experience.” Most of us have simply never experienced, and therefore, have a hard time imagining, any other way for power or authority to work than the top-down model. We accept that there is some sovereign power over us that governs much of our lives much of the time, whether it be a school principal or a shop foreman or a department manager or a higher ranking officer, or even the much less clearly defined, but no less authoritative, dictates of our child’s soccer coach or piano teacher. We’re always struggling to balance competing claims from competing authorities, aren’t we? We always live under someone or something’s authority or power.

But it’s how that authority or power works where the real question for our lives becomes compelling. Does power flow down from the top, or does it flow up from below? Does lordship or sovereignty imply power over those below in the hierarchy of being, or does it mean something else?

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the earliest Christian movement was that it was self-consciously and radically egalitarian in its concept of authority and power. In a society that was patriarchal and hierarchical and rigidly stratified, St. Paul proclaimed, “*there is no longer any Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.*” The earliest Christian confessional statement that we find in the New Testament is the phrase, “the Messiah is Lord,” or “Jesus the Messiah is Lord.” In the political and social milieu of the time, Caesar alone was the one acknowledged as “lord” or “savior,” who brings universal peace to his subjects. So this confession on the part of a small minority of inhabitants of Caesar’s empire was, and is, nothing less than a radically subversive claim. To confess that Jesus was lord was a powerful witness to their conviction that while Caesar’s rule might govern their earthly existence, it didn’t define it; their commitment to a lord who was greater than Caesar and who

wielded power in a very different way did. As St. Paul put it, “*Our citizenship [commonwealth] is in heaven, and from there we await a Savior, Jesus the Messiah.*” (Phil. 3:20). That confession and the radically egalitarian practice of the earliest Christians explains why they were persecuted by the Roman empire, and also why their growth was almost exponential in those first centuries.

Human nature being what it is, and the demands of society being what they are, as time went on, Christians, found it all too easy to picture King Jesus as a sort of oversized version of the Roman emperor who sat on his throne in glory and ruled over his wide empire, and even to adopt that top-down model of power themselves. Within the Church struggles over sovereignty were present almost from the beginning. Top-down power structures were beginning to evolve before the end of the first century, and by the second century, we had already evolved the hierarchically-ordered offices of bishops, presbyters and deacons. The church retained the language of equality and servanthood in relation to the power exercised by these offices, (even today the Bishop of Rome describes himself as the “servant of the servants of God,”) but in reality, the Church simply mirrored the organization of society of imperial Rome, with the bishop of Rome or the patriarch of Constantinople exercising top-down power in the spiritual realm corresponding to the way the emperor exercised it in the temporal realm.

If you’ve been to Florence, for example, and gone into the magnificent baptistery next to the Duomo, and gazed up at the stunning mosaics on the ceiling, you will have seen this glorious and powerful Christ gazing down in benevolent splendor. That image of Christ pictured as a powerful king in the heavens is the image that fueled the Crusades and was the driving inner force of the Inquisition. It is still that image of earthly kingship projected onto Christ which

makes some Christians, particularly in America, so keen to legislate their religious values on the rest of their fellow citizens, despite the religiously and culturally pluralistic nature of our society.

The result of picturing Christ as a king who wields his power like an earthly monarch is always oppressive. As the ancient British chieftain Calgacus said of the Roman empire’s use of power, “They create a desert, and call it peace.” (Tacitus, *De vita et moribus Iulii Agricolae*) If power is at the top and flows downward, then the further from that power one is, the less one counts, and the more vulnerable one is, and the less diversity or difference can be tolerated. Christian triumphalism is an old temptation, and one to which the Church has succumbed far too often.

It is, perhaps, precisely to nip such triumphalistic tendencies in the bud, that the author of Colossians wrote this epistle, and quoted an early Christian hymn that is our lesson this morning. It celebrates the risen Christ as the sovereign lord of the universe. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. . . he is before all things and in him all things hold together. . . he is the beginning so that he might be preeminent in everything. . . in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. . . reconciling all things in heaven and earth, making peace.*”

It’s full of exalted language about Christ’s rule over the dominions and powers and thrones, hailing Christ as the firstborn of all creation, and the head over all things, with the result that this conquering, lordly Christ has brought universal peace, the exact same claims as were made of Caesar. With one startling and profound difference however, a difference that almost goes unnoticed unless we read this passage very carefully, because it is just one little phrase tacked onto the end of this glorious imperial

language. If Caesar made peace through the might of his legions, the peace that the Messiah Jesus makes is *“through the blood of his cross.”*

Wow! Now that brings us back down to earth with a jolt. How did we get from Christ the cosmic emperor to a dead man on a cross? How indeed! But if our author intended us to trip over that phrase just as we were gearing up for a self-congratulatory revel that we have a greater king than Caesar, and therefore, can feel superior to others, then he certainly succeeds. For that phrase, short as it is, has the effect of completely subverting all conventional notions of royal power, all worldly notions about what constitutes authority and glory. To speak of a dead man hanging on a cross as the cosmic lord of creation who achieves universal peace for humanity is nothing short of absurd.

But in that very absurdity lies the real power, as well as the real scandal, of the gospel. The writer of Colossians uses four “R” words to unpack his claims of Christ’s sovereignty; they’re not the three “R’s” many of us learned as children, “readin,’ ritin,’ and ‘rithmetic. Rather, the four “R’s” of Christ’s lordship are rescue, relocation, redemption and reconciliation.

*“God has **rescued** us from the power of darkness, and has **relocated** us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have **redemption**—the forgiveness of sins. . . and through him, God was pleased to **reconcile** all things, whether in heaven or on earth, making peace through the blood of his cross.”*

First, there is the recognition that humanity needs to be rescued. That’s pretty much a no-brainer, isn’t it? We don’t have many Dr. Panglosses around these days insisting, despite all evidence to the contrary, that “this is the best of all possible worlds.” We know it’s not. And the reason is not hard to find: it’s the reason for the third “R”—redemption. Left to our own devices, we can pretty much guarantee

that we’ll make a hash of things, either through ignorance, greed, lust for power, pride, or any of the other seven deadly sins. We’ve rung the changes on all of them. We are slavishly devoted to our own inordinate desires. So unless someone is around who can redeem us, that is, liberate us from that slavery to self-centeredness and selfishness, then not much can help us. And that God has done in and through the Messiah, Jesus, says our writer. God has forgiven us and wiped the slate clean. We are rescued and redeemed.

But the second “R” is the key to our ability to live in freedom from selfishness and self-centeredness. It’s what makes it possible for us to experience and live in that forgiveness rather than to continue living in the mess we’ve made. God has not only rescued and redeemed us, but has also relocated us into a new realm of sovereignty. Jesus called it “the Kingdom of God.” It’s the realm where God’s writ runs rather than Caesar’s or ours. It’s the realm where through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are actually able to live in new relationships with one another—relationships of equality and justice and peace. We now take our cues from heaven rather than from earthly power or sovereigns. We are not defined by nationality or race or social status or economic status as we once were; we are defined by our citizenship in the kingdom of God. When we confess Jesus the Messiah as lord, it becomes possible for us to have relationships that are governed, not by competition or hierarchical and oppressive structures of power, but by equality, freedom, justice, and peace. Power doesn’t flow down, but up from a posture of servanthood. The one we confess as “Lord” and “Savior” is one who has modeled for us the ultimate in self-sacrificing love.

And that brings us to the fourth “R”—reconciliation. It means to bring together forces that are opposing or competing or

fragmenting into a unity where all the energies are harnessed and directed toward the same goal. We pray for that each time we say the Lord's Prayer, "*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" That's reconciliation. And each time the occasion demands it, when we choose the way that leads toward unity rather than disunity, peace rather than war or strife, justice rather than injustice, compassion rather than competition, then we are, in fact, living in that realm where earth and heaven are reconciled.

And that, of course, is what being the Church is all about. We're called to be the community of those who live as citizens of heaven even while we're on earth. We confess as the ultimate ruler of all things a Lord whose way of making peace is to sacrifice himself for others, because he was convinced that this is ultimately God's world, and God's love will ultimately triumph, even over death itself.

To confess Christ as king is to commit ourselves to living a cross-shaped life, and to being part of a community whose corporate life—our relationships with each other—is also shaped by that cross. That is our calling.

Robert Sheldon tells the story of a small Austrian town where the old central section of town was being torn down so that a new town center could be built. Many years before, a gigantic granite cross had been erected in that town center, and it was deeply embedded in the ground. The construction crew tried everything, but they couldn't budge that cross. It was stuck fast. The people of the town were all watching with interest at the labors of the wrecking crew, and among them was a man with severe mental disabilities whom everyone knew and benevolently tolerated. While the engineers were scratching their heads to figure out how to get the cross out of the ground, this man began to dance around and laugh, and he shouted, "Ha! Ha! You can't dig it out! You can't dig it out! It

goes to the center of the world!" And so it does. And so it will, till kingdom come.