

## **KINGDOM IS NOT A SEXIST WORD – IT’S A SUBVERSIVE WORD**

*Sermon for Pentecost Last (Christ the King)- Mt 24:31-46*

LPC, 11/26/17

Last week I preached a sermon contrasting the kingdom of God with the kingdom of men. In the original version of that sermon I included a sort of apology for using such sexist language. I had tried using the expression “kingdom of humans”, but it just didn’t have the same ring. In the event I didn’t end up getting any complaints for using “kingdom of men.” But these days you sometimes have to be careful.

For example, as many of you know, the kingdom of God is a major theme in my ministry. When I used that expression in writing my doctoral thesis, I was questioned on it. Because “kingdom” is a gender-specific word, many theologians active today use the words “reign of God” or “realm of God.” I was called upon to defend my use of the more traditional language. So I added a paragraph in which I said:

The [biblical] phrase βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ (*basileia tou theou*) occurs dozens of times throughout the New Testament. The translation currently favored by scholars is “reign of God,” which avoids the pitfalls associated with maleness, monarchy and geographical location attendant upon the more traditional translation “kingdom of God.” Though sensitive to these pitfalls and cognizant of the advantages of a term that more easily transcends time, space and gender, I have not myself fully made the transition to “reign,” and find myself reverting to “kingdom” for these reasons. First, “kingdom” is used in the translation with which my congregation is most familiar. In the context of [my church], the use of “reign” would likely have been unnecessarily distracting. Secondly, even in first-century paternalistic culture where “kingdom” language was normative, Jesus totally subverted the idea of (male) monarchy as it was understood. In other words, the term was ironic even in Jesus’ day.

I apologize for being so academic. This is the kind of arcane controversy that gives academics a bad name among people who are just trying to figure out what the Bible means for them in their daily lives. I share this with you now only to make a point about the kingship of Jesus Christ on this Christ the King Sunday. Jesus was not a king the way we think about kings. And his kingdom is not a kingdom like other kingdoms.

The kingdoms we know have geographical boundaries. Christ’s kingdom knows none. Earthly reigns have a beginning and an end. Christ’s kingdom exists now and forever. Earthly kings are wealthy and inclined to be autocratic. Jesus clearly is not.

Think of how many ways Jesus embodies the unconventionality of his kingdom throughout his life. He is born in a stable with the animals, for heaven’s sake. He grows up to be an ordinary tradesman, not the lowest of the low, but not privileged either. He calls fishermen to be his followers. He turns away no one, eats with tax collectors, associates with prostitutes, touches lepers, converses with women as equals, praises foreigners, welcomes children, and heals and forgives them all. He comes into town on a donkey, surrounded by children, not on a

richly-caparisoned battle steed surrounded by an army. When physically attacked, he refuses to defend himself by force, and he accepts the most ignominious of executions.

Because we know all these stories by heart, it is easy for us not to notice what a very subversive kingship this is. If the people we pay allegiance to all acted like this, the world would be a very different place, scarily divergent from the world we take for granted.

In fact the kind of world where the people who have our allegiance are this humble is so distant from our common experience that we content ourselves with associating this state of affairs exclusively with the world to come – that time when Christ will come again in glory to judge both the quick and dead.

We heard about this in last week's Sunday lectionary readings. Remember that bit about Christ coming on the clouds to sweep all of the righteous up with him into heaven? Some Christians place more emphasis on this than others, making what they often call "the Rapture" the center of their life and ethic.

There's no denying that this language appears in the Bible. But any discussion of the Second Coming of Christ needs to take into account that when Christ establishes his kingdom once and for all and over all, it's not going to look like anything we have ever seen before... except in the person of Jesus, and in the very few people who take his radical teaching to heart.

Jesus Christ is king. But according to the teaching in today's Gospel passage, Jesus Christ is also the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. We serve our king when we serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. In this way, the hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick and imprisoned are our king in this world.

This means that when we serve the so-called "less fortunate" we are not serving from a superior position. We are not even serving as equals. We are serving as subjects serve their liege lord, their king. We are serving from a position of humility, not from a position of largesse.

What does it mean when we regard the people who sell newspapers under the overpass as our king? The people that have signs saying, "Homeless, every bit helps"? The people at the soup kitchen? The addicted? The unwashed? Those who make us want to lock our car doors when we drive through their neighborhoods? These people are our kings?

This is such a difficult concept that I have trouble getting my head around it. I can't tell you how to apply it to your life because I haven't yet figured out what it means for mine. But I think we are meant to hold these things in our hearts, and allow them, as much as we are able to become manifest in our attitudes and actions, especially toward the hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick and imprisoned.

Today's teaching tells us that saying, "Jesus is Lord" does not in itself acknowledge Jesus' kingship. The way we treat other people, particularly those who differ from us, does.