

November 26, 2017
Reign of Christ

Glimpses of the Kingdom

Matthew 25:31-46

Next Sunday the season of Advent begins and we start the cycle of the church year once again. And on this final Sunday of the church year, we affirm our faith in Jesus Christ as the divine sovereign of the universe. Christ the King, or Reign of Christ, Sunday is not an ancient concept. It began in 1925 in response to the chaotic world of the twentieth century following World War I and the growing secularism that declared there was no need for God. We affirm that Jesus Christ reigns in and over all creatures and all creation. This Sunday points to the end of time when this world will be transformed into the reign and realm of God; the kingdom of God, but also says that this new kingdom is already among us, like leaven in a lump of dough.

We all know that, through the lens of the “news” we hear each day, it does not appear that Jesus reigns. Indeed, if the world seemed divided and chaotic in 1925, how much more so today. If Jesus reigns, many would ask, where is the evidence of it? The evidence is seen everywhere that new realm is lived out. When you and I live like citizens of the new world in Christ, we offer a glimpse to the rest of this world what that world will one day look like, and we say to the world that Jesus reigns even now.

I offer three examples.

Imagine knowing that you live next door to the man who murdered your son. How would you treat him? How would you look at him? How would you *feel* toward him? In 1993, 16-year-old Oshea Israel was at a party where he got into an argument with 20-year-old Laranian Byrd. Oshea says egos got in the way and the argument escalated into a shooting, and when it was over, Laranian was dead. Oshea was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

Laranian’s mother, Mary, said that wasn’t enough. She called Oshea an animal who deserved to be caged the rest of his life. But, ten years after Oshea went to prison, Mary experienced a transformation of her heart. It happened when she read a poem and felt God telling her something through that poem. It is about two mothers who meet in heaven, and, they each know that the other had known the loss of their child. The first mother says,

*“I once had a son,
A sweet little lad, full of laughter and fun.*

*“Oh, I knew I was blessed
From the moment I first held him close to my breast,
And my heart almost burst with the joy of that day.”
“Ah, yes,” said the other, “I felt the same way.”*

*“How often I shielded and spared him from pain
And when he for others was so cruelly slain.
When they crucified him – and they spat in his face
How gladly would I have hung there in his place!”*

*A moment of silence – “Oh, then you are she –
The mother of Christ”; and she fell on one knee.
But the Blessed one raised her up, drawing her near,
And kissed from the cheek of the woman, a tear.*

*“Tell me the name of the son you love so,
That I may share in your grief and your woe.”
She lifted her eyes, looking straight at the other,
“He was Judas Iscariot: I am his mother.”¹*

That poem caused Mary to stop seeing Oshea as an animal needing to be caged, and to begin to see him as a mother’s son. She knew God was telling her to visit Oshea in prison. That first meeting was hard for both of them, but she continued to visit, and, gradually, enemies became friends. When he was

¹ <https://susanjoan.wordpress.com/2009/11/10/two-mothers/>

released after 17 years in prison, she helped him find a place to live...in the apartment right next door to her.

“Unforgiveness,” she says, “is like cancer. It will eat you from the inside out.”² Now, the man who took her son’s life has become not only her neighbor, but her spiritual son.

The reign of Christ is about the healing of hearts and the healing of relationships. A chance encounter with a poem is not chance at all, and the courage to meet the one whose heart you broke when you took her son’s life comes from somewhere beyond what this world knows of courage. The reign of Christ is present today, and it is also the hope of a new day, when the kind of reconciliation Mary and Oseba have experienced will be the norm, not the rare exception. It is about living into that new day today, in our neighborhood and in this vast neighborhood called planet Earth.

Elias Chacour’s ancestors had lived in the northern hills of Israel since the time of Christ. They were among the first Christians in those Galilean hills, and they had long lived as Palestinian Christians among their brother and sister Jews, suffering together under the Romans, Persians and Turks. He was a 7-year-old boy when World War II came to an end. The member countries of the United Nations were sympathetic to the suffering of Jews under Hitler, but those countries were not willing to welcome Jewish refugees into their own homelands, and so the U.N. created and enforced an agreement in which Jews from Europe were allowed to have a majority of the land that Palestinian Christians and Muslims had called home for centuries.

Chacour describes the first thing he remembers: *Early one morning [outside our small sleepy village] the hillside was flooded with the rumbling of trucks and jeeps. Men in drab-colored uniforms...filled the narrow streets. My brothers and I watched from a corner of our yard, whispering among ourselves as four or five soldiers strode up to our door. They spoke with Father, who welcomed them, and they lugged their gear inside. These Zionist soldiers were not at all like our Jewish neighbors. They remained aloof, almost brusque. The second thing I recall was the guns. They were always present, even when we ate. The guns were might – and power – and my family and fellow villagers had no might.*³

Soon, the soldiers who had been welcomed by the villagers forced everyone out of their homes, out of their village, and then the entire town was blown into oblivion. Like many other places in the newly created nation of Israel, after centuries of living in their homes, working their vineyards and groves, these Palestinian Christians and Muslims had everything taken from them. Young Elias might have grown up to be bitter. Many did. He might have grown up fighting against those who took his family’s land and livelihood. Many have. But, instead, Elias grew up to be a priest who has spent his life trying to bridge the huge divide between the nation of Israel and the Palestinian Christians and Muslims who were forced out of their land. He has been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

He spoke at Emory University’s commencement in 2001. Listen to what he said:

You who live in the United States, if you are pro-Israel...give further friendship to Israel. They need your friendship. But stop interpreting that friendship as an automatic antipathy against me, the Palestinian who is paying the bill for what others have done against my beloved Jewish brothers and sisters in the Holocaust and Auschwitz.

*And if you...take the side of the Palestinians -- oh, bless your hearts. But if taking our side would mean to become one-sided against my Jewish brothers and sisters, back up. We do not need such friendship. We need one more common friend. We do not need one more enemy, for God's sake.*⁴

Whether it is on the other side of the globe, or on the other side of the street, the Spirit of Christ is at work, offering glimpses and foretastes of the world that is on its way. And he calls us to be the window, dim though it may be, through which this world can see the new world that is here and yet coming.

One more story.

We host English-language classes here at the church four mornings a week. About a dozen or so women, refugees from countries around the world where it was no longer safe for them to live, bring their children who are cared for in our nursery, and they learn to speak English here in their new home. A group of women here at church has begun to befriend our new neighbors. They started by having lunch together, learning each other’s names and each other’s stories. Two weeks ago, both groups of women met in the kitchen of our Family Life Center where, together, they prepared and shared a Thanksgiving

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2BITY-3Mp4>

³ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers*. Baker Books, 2013, pp. 41-42

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias_Chacour

dinner. The director of the program sent a note of thanks, saying that the fact that Christian women unconditionally welcomed Muslim women has meant more than we can know.

What we do know is that Jesus said, "When you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

What we do know is that when we forgive those who hurt us as Mary has forgiven Oshea;
when we live as peacemakers trying to reconcile those who have been enemies as Elias Chacour has dedicated his life to doing;

and, when we welcome the stranger among us and call her friend, we offer to everyone a glimpse of the new world in which Jesus reigns, love binds all people together, and peace endures forever.

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