

“Grateful for the King”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christ the King Sunday – November 24, 2013

Colossians 1: 11-20
Luke 1: 68-79

As Americans, we have a hard time relating to royalty. Let’s face it, our country was created explicitly because we did not wish to be ruled by a monarch anymore. I find it terribly ironic that as 21st-century Americans, we can become totally fascinated by a wedding or birth in the British royal family, when in fact we declared 237 years ago that that family’s ancestors were an oppressive tyranny. And I can say that on two occasions in my life, I have celebrated the Fourth of July in Great Britain. Talk about conflicting emotions!

It’s hard for us get our heads around the idea of a king or queen ruling over us. That’s not something we’ve experienced. We have elected women and men to serve in government, and we have the opportunity on a consistent basis to choose those leaders again, or to select new ones, based on our judgment of how they’ve governed us. We aren’t familiar with someone ruling us for life, or inheriting the authority and power to make those decisions, without our input whatsoever. It’s strange indeed to think about having a king or queen.

In the church’s calendar, today is called “Christ the King Sunday.” It’s the last Sunday before we begin a new church year with Advent next week. What does it mean to celebrate Christ as our King, especially when we are so unfamiliar with monarchs as modern-day Americans? And why is it important to celebrate Christ’s kingly nature today, right before we prepare for Advent and Christmas?

I think there is a great deal of symbolism in celebrating the kingship of Christ on this day, the last day before we prepare for the arrival of God’s Son. Before we can welcome the Christ Child, we must recognize the place this child will have in our life. Before we can sing the carols of Christmas, we must understand how Christ is both a mighty ruler and a humble king. Before we can kneel at the stable in Bethlehem, we must kneel before the throne of grace and accept the rule of Christ in our lives. Before we celebrate the birth of our king, we must be prepared to acknowledge that he is our king.

In this passage from Colossians, we hear Paul telling us of this crucial dynamic of faith. Many times we will speak this passage as an affirmation of faith, because it is a pronouncement of our faith in God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. Listen to it again, and consider how it speaks to the kingly nature of Christ:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (1:15-20).

Peter Marty speaks to the way “Christ holds all things together.” He notes that eventually glue and adhesive will disintegrate, and things which once were held together will come apart. *Fortunately, the bond that we know through the Christian faith has a longer life; Jesus Christ is the coherence of creation. He is not only “before all things,” but “in him all things hold together.” He is the glue that never dies, the bond that never fails, the togetherness of the complex world we inhabit . . . Were God’s power to dry up in the life of this Christ, the world would revert to chaos – a jumbled and incoherent mess . . .*

In our individual experience, it seems that when a few things fall apart, the whole apparatus of life threatens to collapse. That’s what I see happening whenever people lose their center and forget the comforting quality of the Lord’s presence . . .

When chaos strikes, faith-filled people look for ways to quit idolizing their fears. They seek strategies for pulling life back together. The challenge for most of us is to make the priority of Christ more than mere words. Who needs more talk of making Christ first in our lives? The world is full of religious talk. We need instead to act, to live as if Christ were indeed the head of the body, and not some extra equipment we strap on when it’s “third and long.”

*In Bibles that provide chapter headings, this section of Colossians may be titled “The Supremacy of Christ,” or something similar. This is the Christ in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” Nothing of God is held back or left out of the person of Jesus. Though God once was content to dwell in places like Sinai, Zion, or the Temple, now God is in a person. Everything that God is, and cares about, now resides in Jesus Christ. Christ is the face or the image of the invisible God (“Super Glue,” *Christian Century*, November 16, 2004, page 20).*

There are many times when it feels as if we have lost control in life. Illnesses, job losses, mounting debt, family stresses – any number of things can cause us to lose our center and experience chaos. The challenge of faith is to sense in the most chaotic times that there is someone holding everything together.

Perhaps those who are able to see God’s presence in the midst of chaos are able to see God in their neighbor. Tom Troeger writes: *To bear the image of God is to see ourselves differently, but not just ourselves. It is to see everyone else differently as well. Sometimes this is very difficult for us. We see someone who is really different from us and we think of them as the stranger, the alien, and we become very*

frightened by them. Maybe it is their religious differences; maybe it is their ethnic or their cultural differences, but they bear this image of God just as unmistakably as we. It is not always because someone is just different. We may fail to see how even those we love are the very image of the God who made them . . .

If I think of you as the enemy or the other, that makes it impossible for us to have a creative or a reconciling relationship. If I see that you are the very image of the one who created you, just as I also am, then think of what that does for each of us. Our life becomes a way of drawing forth all that is best from each other's heart, all that is best in each other's gifts.

This is why the early church, particularly the writer of Colossians, said of Jesus, "He is the very image of the invisible God." What they meant by that is when we look at Jesus and we see Him feeding the hungry, we see the image of God in action. When we look at Jesus and see Him healing somebody who is broken and in need, we see the image of God in action ("I'd Know That Face Anywhere," www.csec.org/csec/sermon/troeger_3719.htm).

I am continually uplifted by the people I know who have been dealt more adversity than 10 people deserve, but they continue to profess their faith. A child is arrested and imprisoned, and the parents say, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God." A woman watches helplessly as her parent no longer recognizes her due to dementia, and she proclaims, "Jesus is before all things, and in him all things hold together." A father grieves over the death of his son at college, and he says, "In Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." We may not be able to make those professions yet in the face of such adversity. But perhaps in our witnessing of others' professions, we see Jesus in our midst, reminding us that he is here and will never abandon us.

Jesus is no ordinary king – he is Christ the King. There is no doubt that the fullness of God dwells in him, so that God might reconcile our sinful nature through the blood of his cross. Before we welcome the Christ Child into this world, may we fully comprehend who it is we are willing to welcome into our hearts. For when we proclaim, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come," we must also be ready to say that this Lord is our King, and we will kneel before him in humility and adoration.

Thanks be to God for the King who holds all things together in grace and love. Amen.