

A Lesson in Leadership

[Text - Luke 23:33 -43]

Pastor Dave Shackle
November 24, 2013

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year, a day when the Church traditionally celebrates the coming Reign of Jesus Christ. Just as the Church Year begins with Advent, a Season of anticipating and awaiting the birth of Christ, the Year also ends with a spirit of anticipation - as we await that day when Christ's Sublime Spirit will rule throughout the earth. So this morning, we focus on Christ coming among us - not as a humble, helpless baby, but in the fulness of Divine power and glory.

Now I'll admit, that from a promotional standpoint, the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas is a far easier sell than the idea of Christ returning to rule the world with unshakable justice. It's certainly more fun to celebrate a birthday, than to anticipate a judgment day! Yet when we talk about the coming of Christ - whether as a tiny baby in a manger, or a majestic ruler on high - we're essentially talking about the same thing: the Divine Call to a radically different way of living.

The story of Jesus' humble beginning, like the story of his horrible death, is distinctively different from the story of every ruler who has ever lived; just as Jesus' entire life is vastly different from so many of this world's powerful or prominent people. So on this Reign of Christ Sunday, I'd like us to think about four distinct differences between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world. I'd also like us to consider how those differences can make a truly positive difference in the way you and I approach our faith, and live our lives.

The first notable difference between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world, is how those realms are established and maintained. I can't think of any sovereign rule - current or historic - that has been instituted and sustained without the use, or threat, of force. Military might and political alliances are key in building and maintaining sovereign rule in this world; yet that's not how it is in the Realm of Christ. Jesus tells his followers to "put away their swords," to "turn the other cheek," and to "love their enemies." [Which I *think* includes not killing them!] And Jesus refuses to play politics with Pontius Pilate, or King Herod, or the Chief Priests, or any other power brokers of his day. That's because Jesus seeks to establish a

completely different type of realm - one which is ruled by compassion and cooperation, rather than fear and force.

This raises the second distinction between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world: Participation in Christ's Realm is *always* a matter of choice; it can never be forced or coerced. Now, sad to say, there have been times - and still are times - when people try to force others to accept the rule of Christ. Yet whether it be through inquisitions, crusades, or constitutional amendments, any attempt to coerce others into following Christ's rule, reveals a complete misunderstanding of the Way of Jesus Christ.

Throughout his life, Jesus sought to draw people to himself through his positive qualities of kindness and compassion, truth and love. He never tried to force others to follow him or to accept his ways; instead, he attracted them with his gracious welcome and his joyful spirit. And though he often displays remarkable power, Jesus consistently chooses to win people over voluntarily. You won't find many leaders like that, but Jesus Christ truly is a different kind of leader.

Which brings up a third contrast between the Reign of Christ and the reign of most worldly leader - which is the attitude they have about themselves. Earthly rulers often try to make themselves appear "bigger than life"; while Jesus divests himself of both heavenly and earthly glory. The Caesars not only declared themselves Supreme Emperors, they also insisted that they were *gods*, and established temples and shrines where the people were to pay them homage. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century European royalty nearly bankrupt their nations so that they could dress in spectacular clothing and reside in luxurious palaces, while their citizens often suffered or starved. Jesus, however, demonstrates a completely opposite approach within his Holy Realm. He comes to graciously feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted, and warmly embrace the poor and neglected people around him.

Jesus lives his life with the barest of earthly possessions. When he enters this world, he is laid to rest in a borrowed manger; at the end, he is laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. As he is dying, soldiers throw dice to see who will get his one piece of property - the robe that he wore. That's quite a difference from the majestic palaces and pyramids in which earthly rulers live and are entombed; but again, Jesus Christ is a completely different kind of leader. He comes to establish a realm where people are more

important than possessions; where giving is valued above getting; and where greatness is measured by what we do for others, rather than by what they do for us.

Which brings us to our final comparison between Jesus Christ and the rulers of this world - which has to do with their final moments. Many earthly leaders will do anything to avoid personal loss or death, regardless of the cost to others. There's no telling how many lives have been sacrificed by world leaders in a last-ditch effort to save their own skin. In many realms, preserving the life of the leader is considered the most important thing in the world; but not so in the Realm of Christ. Jesus says, "No greater love has a person than this: to lay down his or her life for another." And then he does *just that!*

You and I can read countless stories about people who have died for the sake of their rulers; but today we celebrate the ruler who dies for the sake of his people - Jesus Christ:

The One whose mission is to serve, rather than be served.

The One who reigns with compassion and kindness, rather than fear and force.

The One who gives-up his life, so that *all* of his followers might live with a fuller and deeper understanding of Divine forgiveness, love, and grace.

So, what does all this mean for you and me today? I believe that Jesus Christ provides us this tremendous example of authentic leadership, to both inspire us and empower us. And that on this final day of our Church Year, you and I are called to do far more than simply sit and wait for the coming Reign of Christ. Today, right now, you and I are invited and challenged to take our part in helping bring about that remarkable Reign:

By intentionally loving our enemies, and freely forgiving those who have wronged us;

By generously using our possessions to help those around us, whatever their need;

By graciously welcoming all people into our community of faith, and into our own hearts and lives;

And by willingly giving ourselves for the sake of others - just like Jesus Christ has done for us.

To paraphrase John f. Kennedy: Today, let us ask not what Christ can do for us, but what we can do for the Christ - and for each and every one of God's children.