

## Who's in Charge?

The Rev. Linda W. McFadden  
First and St. Stephen's UCC, Baltimore, MD  
November 22, 2009, Christ the King  
Rev. 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Every week we pray, "Thy kingdom come," but what does it actually mean for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans to pray for the coming of a sovereign? Kingship is an alien concept for us. What do we know about kings and queens, except that our ancestors rejected the concept of royalty right from the get-go?

This last Sunday in the liturgical year, designated as the Festival of Christ the King or the Reign of Christ, is not actually an ancient tradition in the church. It was created in 1925, by Pope Pius XI. At that time, Europe was in turmoil, inflation was rampant, and the forces that would bring about the Holocaust and the Second World War were at work. In the face of so much chaos, the pope established the Festival of the Reign of Christ to declare that Christ is king of all, the goal of all human history, the one who "was and is and is to come."

Whether or not we have any direct experience of monarchs, one thing we mean when we pray "thy kingdom come" is this: we need to know that *somebody* is in charge of things.

In the Dr. Seuss story *The Cat in the Hat*, two children are left moping at home one rainy afternoon while their mother has to go out. Suddenly, a mysterious visitor appears—a cat wearing a candy-striped top hat. The cat in the hat entertains the children by breaking every rule of behavior ever laid down by parents. The children have a wonderful time, while the house becomes a complete shambles. They're having such a good time they don't notice time passing until Mother is coming up the walk. The children notice the enormous mess they have created and they panic. They moan,

This mess is so big  
And so deep and so tall,  
We cannot pick it up.  
There is no way at all!

As we look around us, we know how those children feel. Even all us grownups are looking for evidence that *somebody* is in charge, somebody who has the ability and the power to clean up the great messes in our world.

Like generations before us, we try to put the responsibility on someone with political clout. In Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, on the night before the Battle of Agincourt, the young king wrestles with the great burdens the people have placed on him: "Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives, our children and our sins lay on the King!" (iv, 1).

Roman law mandated that Caesar be worshiped as a god, although, of course, Caesar was only a man. Today politicians declare their godhood, and we half believe them—we

want to believe them—yet when it turns out that they are after all only human, we are dismayed. Long ago, the Psalmist warned, “*Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish*” (Ps. 146:3-4). Still it seems that each generation has to learn that lesson for itself.

In the gospel reading, Jesus stands before Pilate, a petty bureaucrat entrusted with the mop and broom of state to keep things tidied up in this minor province of the Empire. He seems pretty impressed with his power. But as he taunts the bedraggled and beaten Jew who stands before him, it becomes clear that the ones actually on trial are Pilate and the whole Roman Empire. While Jesus and Pilate are debating truth, another sort of trial is going on in the courtyard outside the praetorium. Peter is being questioned about his discipleship. It’s dark, the disciples are getting the third degree, and things are falling apart. It’s not going well, and before daylight comes, Peter will deny Jesus three times.<sup>i</sup>

So the big question is, *Who’s in charge when it’s dark and things are falling apart?* The crowd there in Palestine says, “We have no king but Caesar!” The crowd today still says that. We look to government to give us economic security, safer streets, and respectful, obedient children. *We have no king but Caesar.* Pilate, who is so puffed up with his own power, turns out to be a puny little guy who couldn’t administer a scout troop, much less a country. The people we elect to govern us bounce checks, cheat on their spouses, and pad their resumes. They’re just like us, for heaven’s sake. How can *they* be in charge?<sup>ii</sup>

Government can do some things well, things like collecting taxes to build a sewer system, for example. But government can’t do anything about the angst that wakes you up in the middle of the night. Government can’t fix systemic racism or homophobia or the rampant intolerance that rip the world apart. We should render unto Caesar the things Caesar *can* make work, but we ought to run like fury from anyone who claims to be able to solve our problems of meaning and identity.

Jesus arrives on the scene, announcing the eternal reign of God, yet we’re not listening. We are like Pilate, verbally sparring with Jesus. “What kind of king are you?” we want to know. “And by the way, what is truth anyway? Nobody believes in that kind of thing!” So his witness is not heard, and we wonder why our vision of the future is not clear, why we so easily lose hope.<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus is sovereign of a realm that is hard to grasp because it’s already here and now *and* the same time, it’s not yet here. Frederick Buechner says of the kingdom that “it is not a place . . . but a condition, insofar as here and there, and now and then, God’s kingly will is being done in various odd ways among us even at this moment; the kingdom has come already. Insofar as all the odd ways we do [God’s] will are at the moment at best half-baked and half-hearted, the kingdom is still a long way off.”

This paradoxical Realm of God inspires us to affirm that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, God is the Alpha and the Omega, the A to Z, of everything. God was before us and will be long after us. God is with us even in the middle of all our

struggles, no matter how big the mess gets. And all of this—the parts of our lives that make sense and the parts that don't, the fate of individuals and of nations—all of it is in the hands of a Higher Power.

That doesn't mean that everything is just or perfect or the way we wish it could be. It means that we are so sure that in the long run, a better world is on the way, we talk and act as if it were *already* here.

Twenty years ago this week, students at the Prague demonstration that sparked the Czech revolution taunted Communist officials with the chant, "You have lost already! You have lost already!" although victory was yet to come.

In South Africa, during the long struggle for racial justice, theologian Alan Boesak used to say that apartheid *has* already fallen. In his words, "The battle is won, even though the struggle is not yet over. And besides, it drives the dragon crazy when you sing about his downfall even though you are bleeding."<sup>iv</sup>

Walter Wink summarizes the paradox like this:

Faith does not wait for God's sovereignty to be established on earth; it behaves as if that sovereignty already holds full sway . . . Like God in the creation, faith calls into being that which does not yet exist, and races ahead to form something new that never was before . . . That is why these singers cannot help joining their voices with the heavenly chorus, singing, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever' (Rev. 11:15). For *singing about* is a way of *bringing about*.<sup>v</sup>

We do indeed have something to sing about. Our thanksgiving on this day celebrates God's generous abundance through ages past *and* a sense of God's presence in this moment *and* a declaration that God is also yet to come. Faith makes it somehow possible to look at the condition of the world and the condition of our lives, yet not despair. When we put our trust not in mortal princes but in the power that hung the stars in place, we see the dazzling universe with entirely new eyes. We see that all of this is not, after all, a mess so deep and so tall it can't be picked up—it's a new reality in the making. There is somebody in charge.

Praise to the One who was and is and is to come. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Wiley Stephens, Thanksgiving in Three Tenses, <http://day1.org>

<sup>iv</sup> Willimon.

<sup>v</sup> *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 323-24.