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**A Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King 2009**  
**The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett ©**  
**Christ Church + Washington Parish**



It's the last Sunday of the church year. Can you believe that Advent starts next week? Only 33 praying days left 'til Christmas. And as the year winds to a close, our Sunday readings bring us to focus on last things, and the promise of ultimate transformation that God holds before us and the world.

And as a symbol of that ultimate transformation, of a world where we live according to God's desires, it is traditional to call this Sunday "The Feast of Christ the King." But as a symbol of divine purpose, kingship presents some problems for us. It is true that "kingship" is all over the Bible, and is associated with Jesus from his birth. But king of what? What kind of king?

For us twenty-first century children of the American Revolution, when we think of kings, we can look to the figurehead monarchs of our day, but we are more likely to think of despotic King George, or, likelier still, Henry VIII or Louis the Sun King – monarchs from the days when being king really meant something.

And that's part of the problem. Because in Jesus' day, and in the Hebrew scriptures, being king really meant something *else*. The closest modern equivalent to a biblical king would be Afghani or Somali warlords. Nation, in the Bible, means a group of people related by birth, a clan, or a tribe, and the kings of the nations were the men who led their tribes into battle.

And clearly, Jesus is not that kind of king, not a warlord at all, as he makes clear in his dialogue with Pontius Pilate in today's gospel reading.

But if Jesus is cagey about his own kingship, he never stops talking about the kingdom of God. But "kingdom" is just as difficult a word for us as "king," maybe moreso because we think of "kingdom" primarily in geographical terms. This was certainly not true in Jesus' time and place, when "kingdom" primarily meant "kingship." When Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world,

he is not talking about being king of another world, he's talking about having a divine source for his authority in this world. And when he talks about the kingdom of God, he's not talking about heaven, he's talking about a new world order. When he says that the kingdom of God is very near indeed, he doesn't mean that paradise is almost close enough to touch, but that divine love and justice has begun erupting into the world we know.

Now this is an understanding it took me a long time to reach. Even when I started thinking about "the reign of God" instead of the "kingdom of God," I still thought of it as a future, or even "out of time" state – the eventuality when creation is finally ordered according to God's purpose; the time when Jesus returns to rule in glory.

But the things I have been learning and experiencing in the last couple of years – the struggles of the church to speak to and worship in our quickly changing culture; the wisdom of people like Brian McClaren and Stephanie Spellers (whose book will guide our Advent studies), my experiences of worship in other contexts and other cultures, my conversations with the clergy of the diocese and our sister churches of other denominations in our neighborhood – have made me understand that the reign of God is not our future hope but our present call.

All of those parables about the reign of God that Jesus tells, that can be so confusing to interpret – Are we supposed to see ourselves as the prodigal son, or the brother, or the father? Who are the slaves who take over the landowner's field? Who is the bridegroom? Is heaven really like a mustard seed? – are, I have come to believe, not about the next world, but about the community to which Jesus is calling his followers.

Through these stories, we, right here, right now, are called to be an image of the reign of God in this world, in this place, in this day.

And we know this because all of those "reign of God" parables have an extraordinary clarity when understood not as descriptions of the next world but as instructions for living in community. The community of God *is* like a mustard seed, that grows and grows until it can provide comfort and shelter for many. The community of God *is* like a family that welcomes back its prodigals with feasting and rejoicing. The community of God *is* like a banquet where, when the folks we expected don't show up, we go out and find and welcome people who are not like us. The community of God *are* a people, who, having found something of great worth, go to extraordinary lengths to make it their own.

Just as Jesus professes to be a different kind of king, the claim and the call he makes on us in these stories is to be a different kind of people, a different kind of community. And the call is for now. One part of that call is to be transformed in the way we welcome the stranger, the way we offer hospitality. The community of God welcomes the stranger not by insisting that she conform to the norms of the community. To say that you are welcome here if you are like us or

are willing to become like us is to say that you are not welcome. The community of God understands that strangers bring their own stories, their own experiences, their own traditions, their own songs, and doesn't merely accept but embraces the knowledge that those stories, experiences, traditions and songs will change the community.

That kind of hospitality, what Stephanie Spellers calls "Radical Hospitality," will be the focus of our Advent study this year, on Wednesday nights and on Sunday mornings, and I hope it will be the focus of your Advent prayers as well. Because if we can embrace the idea that we as a community are called to be the image of the reign of God as Jesus describes it, we can be transformed ourselves, and, in so doing, transform the world.

Amen.