

Sermon
Cosmic Christ Sunday
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay, California
November 20, 2022
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

We have come together to worship today right at the hinge point of our church year. It is no surprise to anybody that Christmas is around the corner. Anybody here unaware of that? And before we celebrate Christmas, we will first celebrate the season of Advent, the season of waiting for Jesus' birth. Do you know what this last Sunday after Pentecost was called as late as the 70s? It was called "The Last Sunday After Pentecost"! I know, hard to believe.

But in the year 1925, when communism was ascendent in Russia, and secularism in the West and the seeds of Nazism in Germany, there was Benito Mussolini in Italy, who proclaimed himself to be the emperor of earth, or something like that, with all attendant privileges. And the pope at the time, Pope Pius XI, felt the need to create a festival of solemnity concerning the true ruler of the world, Jesus Christ, on the last Sunday in October. So that's when Christ the King Sunday came to be, in 1925.

Over some decades, the observance was moved to the last Sunday in Pentecost, which, without any festival connected with it, had an open space for one. And swiftly, Protestants such as Lutherans took on the commemoration. So that, as Christians we can show us where our true allegiances lay. Not with earthly kings or queens, but with Jesus, the King of, well, everything.

Okay. But Protestant Americans do not have a history of monarchial rule, so what do we make of it? If Christ is King, how? And what kind of rule does Christ have?

I was so tickled when Gail Brochtrup called me, having proofread the bulletin for today, with concern that, you know, the gospel lesson was about Jesus on the cross. Isn't that an Easter week lesson, Pastor Brian? she asked. Is it perhaps a mistake, a holdover from another bulletin

that you forgot to change? Holy Week is in November now? Just checking. To which I said, yes, no, and no.

You see, Jesus Christ is a King, but a strange King indeed. The same fellow who wrote the liturgy we are presently using, Ray Makeever, also wrote a hymn for Good Friday. It goes like this:

Strange King on a cross
 We have gained what you have lost
 Your life given for us
 Strange King on a cross.

What a strange way to become a king
 Dying on a cross
 What a strange way to become a king
 Dying for us.

This is not the way earthly kings rule. It is not the king or queen who dies, but those who oppose them. Kings lead armies and yield power. Humility is not generally a royal virtue. Sacrifice of one's life is not usually a regal action.

Yet, here was Jesus, being tortured, whipped, made fun of, abandoned in the face of Roman power, crucified along with two criminals, outside the walls of Jerusalem. And a sign had been placed at the top of his cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Symbolized by the Latin initials, INRI. To the Romans, it was not a real sign, but a joke sign. As if to say, We have no beef with Jesus of Nazareth, except that we have been forced to crucify him by request, and we are doing so to keep order. And, if you didn't already know, the real king here is Caesar.

And what did Jesus do on that cross? Did he rail against the authorities? Did he pout? Did he curse his accusers? Did he, as others around him suggested THREE times, use his mighty powers and stohimself? No, no, no, and no. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." The people around him not only didn't know what they were

doing, but they did not understand what Jesus was doing. Giving his life. Instituting a rule of forgiveness, a dominion built on compassion, a citizenship built on the power of love, an army full of grace. A deceptively mighty, scoffed at, misjudged, irresistible force.

The gospel of John shows other indications of who Jesus was, especially as the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ. In the first chapter, verse 1 and following:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 The Word was in the beginning with God.
 All things came into being through the Word,
 and without the Word not one thing came into being.
 What has come into being in the Word was life,
 and the life was the light of all people.
 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And there's more, in the third chapter, beginning with the sixteenth verse:

For God so loved the world as to give the only Son,
 so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
 but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The Word and the Son are one. The Son, this Jesus, was sent into the world, for divinity to become matter and flesh, for the sake of the world, the *kosmos*. That Greek word of the New Testament means not only the world, but the universe and everything in it. Since Jesus was the Word, the co-creator of all that is, then Jesus the Christ was capable of saving it. To save, and also to rescue, to deliver, to keep safe, to heal, to make well. That is Christ the King. And what Christ the King does.

That is also why I have taken the suggestion from others to call this Sunday, Cosmic Christ Sunday. Through love, God has given us Jesus, and Jesus has given us God. Through Jesus the King, the Messiah, heaven and earth have met, the divine and the everyday. Martin Luther wrote: "by a wonderful exchange, our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the

righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours.” Through the appearance of Jesus the Word among us, we and the world are utterly changed

It is the easiest thing in the world to become so engrossed in the tasks of living and surviving and perhaps thriving that we can lose sight of the fact that Christ is **IN** us, that matter and energy are linked. They are in reality the same thing, like Einstein made clear, just different and integrally related forms. That is why it is possible for us to partake of the body of Christ, the very body of God, at this altar, in this sanctuary.

I have this abiding and vivid memory, of sitting on one of the retaining walls in my childhood street, Stratford Avenue in South Pasadena, which was blessedly full of children and young people. There was almost always some school-aged people about, especially in the public park that we shared a block with. This particularly summer evening we were sitting there, enjoying being out after dinnertime. Some of the kids had just returned from summer camp, a place from which you could sometimes see heaven, or at least feel a bit of it. They were waxing as eloquently as their six-grade minds were able. But when it came down to actually describing what they had experienced, the best they could say is that you had to be there. It was, to my mind, a powerful mystery, and I longed to have been there.

I got my chance in YMCA camp, at Bluff Lake, for which I sold many cans of butter toffee peanuts. But that was not the Edenic experience I had hoped for. Travelling for many hours in the back of a big container truck was the least of it. And the odd rituals, well, not nearly so good as church. Which made church camp a bit better. I still don't know why those friends loved their camp so much, but I'm thinking, when we realize our co-existence with the Christ of the Cosmos, this might be how we might talk!

“You wouldn’t believe how it was! Top of the world! So much love and fellowship! I felt so close to the others! We were all in it together! It was joyful and beautiful and cosmic! Because you know who was there? The ruler of the universe! Right there at camp! Right there on the trail! Right there in our singing and our praying!

It’s a good time to be remembering who we belong to, who loves us, and who sends us out. Not that there is a bad time to be reconnected, re-membered to Jesus Christ, to God, to be hooked into the power of the Holy Spirit! The only bad time mightwell, I can’t think of one.

We’re about to celebrate Jesus’ birth, in a month or so. But do you know when the Christ’s birthday is? I’ve been told. It was the Big Bang, fourteen and a half billion years ago, or so. Before this earth existed. Before matter was even differentiated. Before any of the heavy elements. Before stars, galaxies, novas, beetles, human beings. Before years and months and appointments and life spans. Before money, jobs, houses, companies, before anything one can see here on earth. Way before intelligent life, so called. This is what Paul had to say about Jesus the Christ in his letter to the Colossians, again.

For in Christ all things in haven and on earth were created,
 things visible and invisible,
 whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers –
 all things have been created through Christ and for Christ.
 Christ indeed is before all things,
 and in Christ all things hold together.
 Christ is the head of the body, the church;
 Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
 so that Christ might come to have first place in everything.
 For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
 and through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things,
 whether on earth or in heaven,
 by making peace through the blood of the cross.

That is truly cosmic. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber

November 19, 2022