

Reign of Christ – Proper 29

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Introduction

The Sunday before Advent is often named ‘The Reign of Christ’. In a time just before reflecting on the incarnation of God in the body of a small child, we hear a text on the vulnerability of a soon-to-be-tortured Jesus before Pilate, the Roman Procurator.

Over and over, the gospel text calls its readers to the radical redoing of power. True power, the gospel tells us, is found in the bodies of people who are brave, even in the face of powers that threaten to break them.

Text

John 18:33–37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Comment

Jesus has been brought into Pilate’s quarters. He is not with any of his compatriots — they will not enter because of the possibility of ritual defilement. So Jesus is with the Roman Pilate, and Pilate has gone out to consult the people. When he comes back in, he asks Jesus whether he’s the King of the Jews.

Jesus’ reply may be one of many things. It may be that he is — even in the face of a state execution — in possession of himself in a way that is characteristic of his disposition.

It seems clear that the writer of the fourth gospel is depicting Jesus as being fully present to himself. His replies show someone who is facing certain torture, and who nonetheless is not capitulating to powers, and is not returning insult for insult; is in full possession of the faculties of reason, challenge, reply and calm.

However — in the single verse of “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” — it may be possible to hear the echoes of a man who is petrified. He’s been left standing unaided in the room of the Roman Procurator and then that same powerful man exits and then returns with an accusation. He may have been wondering: *who* is saying *what* about me?

Arriving at the end of the Christian liturgical calendar, the Church marks today as ‘The Reign of Christ’. It is a curious — and yet, appropriate — text. Power, in the gospel depiction, is always contained in moments that are caught between death and life. Jesus here, hangs on the balance, and is about to fall off. He is about to be subject to an atrocious execution; he is abandoned by the people that love him; and astonishingly, he is collected in himself, despite the fear. All of this the week before Advent, five weeks before Christmas tales of babies and Roman Occupation.

The unfortunately named ‘Reign of Christ’ Sunday on the liturgical calendar reminds us that the Christian approach to ‘reign’ is laced with death, reframing, defamiliarisation and determination. To ‘reign’ is to find human encounter, even with your enemy. To ‘reign’ is to find the capacity to hold steady, even when misunderstood by your own dearly beloved. To ‘reign’ is to believe that there is something — or Someone — who has given humanity a destiny that is not revealed in torture, but a destiny that is revealed in the kind of love that will go to the end of itself for the purpose of showing love.

In conflict negotiations, the parties to the conflict are often called to consider the ways in which the outcome can be to the benefit of everyone. This is appropriate and it makes sense. Yet, over and over, in the Christian gospels, we find a witness to love that places a burden on the disciple: think about what is most loving right now.

Is it a burden though? Or is it a vocation? — a place where the disciple can find their truest voice: in being beholden to no-one, not even a despotic power, in being in control of the love you can show, while being cowed down by no-one, and speaking truth to authorities that do not know how to speak with true authority.

The ‘Reign of Christ’ is a phrase that has been abominably misused over the centuries of Christianity. It has been used to justify colonisation, the silencing of individuals, the shaming of societies. And yet, this reign calls those who are called to it, to a life of dedication, of service, of steely faced communication in the face of manipulation, and calls us all through death to a horizon of our true vocation: love.

Response

As we mark this feast in the Church calendar, consider contemporary witnesses in your spheres of society. Where are there people who are showing this kind of love in society?

response to recent events, the US Poet Laureate, Tracy K Smith, has a poem in her book *Wade In The Water*, about Ieshia Evans, a woman who was photographed standing steady in the face of oncoming police aggression. This photograph, and



Smith's poem, is a contemporary demonstration of the kind of reign being marked on a day like this. A reign of dignity and defiance. [You can read an interview with Ieshia Evans here.](#)

Unrest in Baton Rouge

Our bodies run with ink dark blood.
Blood pools in the pavement's seams.

Is it strange to say love is a language
Few practice, but all, or near all speak?

Even the men in black armor, the ones
Jangling handcuffs and keys, what else

Are they so buffered against, if not love's blade
Sizing up the heart's familiar meat?

We watch and grieve. We sleep, stir, eat.
Love: the heart sliced open, gutted, clean.

Love: naked almost in the everlasting street,
Skirt lifted by a different kind of breeze.

Wade in the Water, Tracy K Smith, Graywolf Press, 2018

If you're interested, there is an extended interview with Tracy K. Smith hosted at On Being with Krista Tippett.

Shivering Jesus
standing in rooms of people with power,
you spoke from the heart
even though you knew your heart would soon stop beating.
Give us courage
to speak from the heart — the heart,
with all its insight, intuition, truth and challenge —
even when we feel alone.
Because when we are alone like this,
we are with you, who was also
alone like this.
Amen.