

CHRIST THE KING AND THE NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
November 21, 2010 Luke 23:33-43

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday was “invented” during the early part of the twentieth century, when the West began to sense the threat of communism, atheism, and secularism, and so against these things the church asserted its belief that there is a God and that the universe is within and under his kingship.

I love how each week our liturgy gives us a broad hint, right up front, as to what the theme of the day is. You see it in the prayer we call the collect. So you heard a few minutes ago when Bishop Grein read the collect that today’s working assumption is that we are divided and enslaved by sin, and that God is trying to free us from that slavery and to reconcile us to Him and to each other so that we can live peacefully and happily under His rule, just as a good King would do.

This is the kind of religious language that drives atheists crazy. Enslaved by sin? Are you kidding me? I’m supposed to be under some heavenly king’s rule? Not on your life. I am a free agent, I’m in charge of myself, and I’m under no one’s rule but my own.

For Christians in the Middle Ages, thinking about God as a king was pretty useful, since medieval kings often exercised an organizing, beneficent kind of power. But for us, the concept of King is pretty antique. Kings don’t seem relevant anymore, because usually they no longer wield real power. And so when we say in the Creed that we

believe that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end, we often don’t know what it is we’re really saying, never mind believing.

A lot of us learned in Sunday School that God is omniscient and omnipotent. He knows everything and he can do anything. Maybe those are the best words we can put to the enormous mystery of God, but keep in mind that words like “omniscient” and “omnipotent” are words based on our human understanding of what is possible. By our very use of them we are trying to squeeze God into the small box of our intellectual constructs. And so we envision God as a kind of super-person. We describe God in terms of how we understand ourselves. We know some things and can do some things, but God knows all things and can do everything.

This way of thinking has obvious limits. One of them is that it cripples our understanding of how God works in history. Think about it. We look at history in linear terms. God made the universe. He made the animals and the people. He chose the Israelites. Eventually there was the Promised Land and then long after that the Roman Empire. Further down the road the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and then we put a man on the moon and so forth. We see these events on a kind of time-line, with God standing behind history, like a giant, pushing it forward toward its conclusion on

the Last Day, when he will deliver the final verdict on everyone.

In this view, history is essentially self-enclosed, and although God has a kind of Master Plan (which we mistakenly call “God’s will”), that plan is largely hidden from us. God allows history to run its course while making a few strategic interventions from the outside, from “up there,” so to speak. Our job “down here” is to make intelligent guesses as to what the Master Plan is, to try to believe in God as hard as we can, to be thankful for the blessings God gives us and to bite the bullet on those painful things that seem to be God’s will for us, and to hope that on the last day, when the court sits in judgment and the books are opened, our entry in the ledger shows more stuff on the side with good deeds and less on the side with bad deeds, so that we will “get to heaven.”

In this view, God lies on either side of history. He was there when he created the universe, and he will reappear when he brings it to an end. The good people will get to him; the bad people won’t.

Scary, plus boring. What a combination. No wonder people don’t come to church. Nonetheless, this is what many, many people believe religion is all about.

This way of understanding God reminds of how discipline was administered in my family. My brother was the first-born and was therefore expected to be perfect which (good for him) he was not. Whenever he acted up, my mother would raise her voice and say to him, “Just wait ‘til your father gets home! You’ll see what’s in store for you then, when I tell him what you’ve done! Just you wait!” She also had a stick that she threatened my father would use on my brother. It was one of those sticks that you

use to stir paint with, and since my Dad repainted our house every few years there were always plenty of them around.

Thankfully, she never used the stick. But the hours would creep by until our Dad got home from work and sat in his armchair to dispense judgment.

I will never forget the dread that filled the house when this happened. The uncertainty and the waiting and the impending doom was always more horrible than the punishment itself.

Now over the long haul my parents were much more loving than they were punitive, but that threatening stick is what the collect is talking about when it says we are divided and enslaved by sin. It’s just the human condition. We are separated from each other by our abuse of power and a wrongheaded understanding of what motivates people to change and of what inspires goodness in them.

Let me tell you about something that happened to me a couple of weeks ago in town. I was on Elm Street, looking for a parking space for my mini cooper. I saw a woman driving a huge SUV begin to back into a huge space on the movie theater side of the street. The space was big enough for 3 cars, but she parked right in the middle of it. It was a beautiful sunny day. I was in a great mood. I rolled down my window and smiled and said to her, “Hi! Would you mind moving your car either up or back a bit so I can fit in too?” And she said, “I’m not going to scrunch up my car!” And she called me a name that rhymes with “witch.” “I’m not going to scrunch up my car, -itch!”

After I regained consciousness, I began to think. About all the anger out there, all the free-floating rage in the media, and online, and in our political discourse. About how I

sometimes hear people talking to their spouses and to their kids. To their kids' teachers, to waiters in restaurants, to their neighbors. People are throwing verbal hand grenades all over the place.

Have you seen the venom online about the young woman who was arrested for allegedly leaving the scene of an accident in which an elderly man was killed on Oenoke Ridge last summer? I know how bad it looks, but the online chatter has been vicious. "Get out of town!" "You're a murderer!" And so forth. Does this remind you of anything? "Crucify him! Crucify him!" "We have a law, and by that law he must be judged!" Judgment has been rendered; the stick has been wielded. And she hasn't even gotten to court yet.

What happened to me on Elm Street was just a little whiff of the rage out there. People have told me of similar experiences in town, and of course in other places too – when was the last time you tried to fit your handheld luggage in the overhead bin in an airplane? It's hand-to-hand combat. What is everyone so angry about?

It might be this: that down deep, we have a primitive suspicion that life is profoundly unstable; that each of us must wage war against the danger, unpredictability, and insufficiency of life; and that in the end we are probably going to lose anyway. If that's your working assumption, then you are going to think about life as a battle, and you will mow down anyone in your path because your life is on such shaky ground that even the slightest contact with another person is threatening and destabilizing.

This way of living makes other people into problems to be solved or obstacles to be overcome. And so it puts you profoundly out of relationship with other people and even with yourself. And I think

our reluctance to recognize this very common dynamic in ourselves leads us to think of God in the way I described a few minutes ago, as a power external to ourselves who stands over against us and who treats us as abusively as we sometimes treat each other.

There's another way to think about God's kingship. It goes something like this: The Christian tradition doesn't really see history as linear. We believe that, in Jesus, God opened up history. He interrupted the timeline, not just to add some glorious event, but to alter it completely, so that history took a different course entirely. God shows us that He does not stand above and beyond history, because in Jesus God becomes one of us. Instead of working on us from "up there" (wielding or withholding the stick), in Jesus God works from the inside. He emerges from among us; he comes to stay, like a Thanksgiving houseguest who never goes home.

And this guest who comes to stay doesn't come as a competent theologian, representing God. He doesn't come as an angel or a book or a super-person. He comes as a tiny person, a baby, completely vulnerable; his only power being his ability to secure the love of his parents. He's the king whose power lies in the fact that he has disowned power. And as we read the story of his life in the gospels, we see that that was also the power of his ministry: the power to attract love, to call out love, to secure love. His ministry was not about judgment in the ordinary sense. It was not about who is "in" and who is "out." It was not about separating the people who get the stick from the people who don't get the stick. God doesn't use his stick, because there is no stick.

So while we know that God's salvific intent came from outside the broken human condition, we always experience salvation from within. Because Jesus came from within. From within the heart of God, from within the body of a woman, from within the human community, in a certain time and place. He was not applied to us, like superglue to a broken teapot.

God still comes to each of us that way. From within. That's what Jesus means when he tells those stories about small hidden things being found: a pearl, a mustard seed, a coin. Don't look anywhere else for salvation. Only within. Because God is not "out there." God is a presence to whom we are asked to attend. And that presence is always struggling to be born in us. This is the most powerful thing in the world.

And so if we are going to live like children of God in the world, we have to be midwives to ourselves. And so remember, as a human being made in the image of God, you are basically good. Don't believe any religious claptrap about your sinful nature being stronger than your capacity to receive God. There is in you a tremendous potential for goodness. Don't be afraid to let life call forth the goodness from you. There isn't any Master Plan for your life other than that: to let the God-given goodness in you be released so that you can be like Jesus.

Whether you accept that way of life or reject it, it will be the only judgment of you that will ever be made. Because in the presence of love, in the presence of Jesus, who is always with us, we cannot help but know what we have made of ourselves.

If you think this all sounds too easy and comfortable, a little touchy-feely, know this: The path of love is strenuous. In today's gospel, we see where it landed Jesus,

slammed up on a cross. And there he is given one last chance to exercise power in the conventional way by saving himself. One last chance to be the external God. He had options. But he refuses. He'd rather die. From the first moment of his life to the last, he was faithful to the love that created him.

It is the same love that created you. Life is not a battle. Life is not a war. Other people are not your enemies, no matter what they have done. You are not your own enemy, no matter what you have done. Don't forget that you are good. Attend to the presence within you. Struggle with it. Let it be born. That's the Kingdom of God.

Amen.