

Jesus Rules

Colossians 1:11-20

In case you missed it, last Monday was National Clean Your Refrigerator Day. Which may sound silly to many of you, but for anyone whose fridge tends to do double duty as a museum of expired products and overdue-for-the-compost-heap leftovers, National Clean Your Refrigerator Day is actually a very helpful public service announcement.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Which may sound like it has nothing in common with National Clean Your Refrigerator Day, but it actually does. And while Christ the King Sunday is a 20th Century creation, the need and usefulness of it goes all the way back to a letter written by the Apostle Paul in the first century to a church in Colossae.

The Letter to the Colossians, especially the passage we read this morning, was like a call to clean up some messiness. Not in refrigerators obviously. But some theological housecleaning that needed to be done in the Church at that time. Housecleaning that remains important for us to be reminded of today, as well.

In the time that the Epistle to the Colossians was written, the pagan religions of the Roman Empire served up a smorgasbord of gods and supernatural beings. Upon converting to Christianity some pagans neglected to clean out and discard those outdated belief systems, attempting instead, to squeeze Jesus into them. Instead of seeing Jesus as the unique Son of God and Lord of all, they considered him to be just one among many angelic beings in the universe. Paul's letter to the Colossians was written to be a guide—not only for them, but for all Christians—to the all-encompassing significance of Jesus that distinguished him from all the other “gods” they were used to.

The first thing Paul emphasizes about Jesus is that, “He is the image of the invisible God”. He is the one who supremely makes the invisible God visible. The nature and being of God are perfectly revealed in Christ. When the disciples asked Jesus to show them the Father he answered, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Jesus is God with skin on.

To back up that claim, Paul adds that, “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” Throughout the Bible God was pleased to dwell in certain places. When the Israelites traveled in the Sinai desert after the exodus from Egypt, God resided in the Tent of the Tabernacle. Later, when the Israelites settled down and stopped being nomads, God's dwelling place was in the Temple in Jerusalem. But with Jesus, God chose to dwell not in a place, but in a person. ALL the FULLNESS of God was there in him. Everything that God is, and cares about, resided in Jesus Christ, the man from Nazareth.

Yet, even the flesh and blood person who walked the earth for some thirty-odd years does not entirely define who Jesus is. He is also “the firstborn of all creation. He himself is before all

things.” Before he was born into our world in a Bethlehem stable, before any worlds existed at all, Jesus existed. He was there when God created the universe. Not just as an observer, but as a co-creator. “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created.” Paul declares to the Colossians. Jesus is identified with the wisdom of God that expressed itself in the creation of the universe. Not only was the Universe created through Christ, it was created FOR Christ. If all things were created through him and for him then that means you and I were created through him and we were created for him.

This is not just messy theological mumbo jumbo. Understanding who Jesus is and what he came for, is essential to understanding who we are and what we are here for. Does contemplation of what God created us for have any bearing on how we live? Or, do we live as if it is Christ who was created for us? Jesus came to restore the harmony which God intended to be our relationship with God, but which our failure to be concerned about God’s purpose for life had poisoned. He came to share with us the communion with God that he himself enjoyed. In Jesus, God accepted all the pain and sacrifice that went into the price of that reconciliation, so that it could be a free gift to us. That’s what Paul means by “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

“He is the head of the church,” which is meant to continue Christ’s ministry in the world. That does not mean that his authority in our lives begins or ends at the doors to the church, though. Paul reminds us that “In him all things hold together.” Jesus connects all the dots of our lives. He connects all things we do and all places we inhabit and every relationship we are a part of, with his purpose for us. There are no compartments of life that are not subject to his authority. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.” First place in everything! Where does Jesus have first place in our life? And where does he not? How many other interests take precedence over our devotion to Jesus? How much time do we have to spare for him?

Do you know what really humbles me when I hear Paul’s message? It’s not just the many, many ways that I neglect to make Christ first in my life. It is that Jesus has set aside his own glory - all that glory that Paul describes - to put me first. And he has done the same thing for you.

Unlike human monarchs, Jesus’ glory and majesty do not serve to put distance between us and him, but to bring us closer together. It is not intended to keep us in our place, but to lift us up to the place where he is; where he has always longed for us to join him. “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and invited us to share in the kingdom of light.”

When bombs were dropped on Buckingham Palace in WWII, the Queen of England said she was glad they had been bombed. That meant she could look the people of London in the face, knowing that she had shared in their common experience. That being royalty did not mean an exemption from suffering, from loss, and from death. By subjecting himself to all the

vulnerability of human existence Jesus revealed to us a God whom we could look in the face and know that we are understood, accepted, and loved.

We Americans tend to be a little uncomfortable with kings and kingdoms. We rejected the whole idea of monarchies when we were still colonies and rebelled against the throne of England. Ever since then we have harbored a deep distrust of anything absolute, that might restrict our personal freedoms. Whether those limits come from absolute rulers or absolute truths. Paul's message here is that there is an absolute, objective truth about Jesus. He is not just who we say he is, he is who he is. But Christ is a king who bestows freedom; not one who takes away our liberty. We are free to believe what we will. The bottom line is that Jesus rules whether we acknowledge it or not; whether we make room in our life for him or not. But, if we accept Christ's lordship, he will, little by little, begin to transform our lives into something closer to what God intended in creating us and in reconciling us to himself.

Next week we will begin the season of Advent. Our thoughts will turn again to the words spoken by prophets and angels about a baby in Bethlehem. "For unto you is born this night in the city of David, a child who is Christ the King." Our hungry ears will welcome songs that proclaim "Glory to the new born king" and name him "King of kings and Lord of Lords." Advent will remind us once again that this is no ordinary child that we greet and welcome into our world, because it was already his world before he arrived in a manger to inhabit it. Christ the King Sunday can open our eyes to just what kind of king this is that angels will proclaim to shepherds, wise men will travel far to worship; and at the mention of his name tyrants like Herod and Pilate will tremble in fear.

Jesus rules. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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