

# *St James United Church*

## Message for November 21, 2021 Reign of Christ Sunday



“The True Meaning of Kingship”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Psalm 93; John 18:33-19:3; Revelation 1:4b-8

Once again, we’ve cycled through the church year and we celebrate Reign of Christ Sunday. As special days go, this one is recent, established in 1925 by the pope in response to what was seen as the growing threat of secularism. It’s no coincidence that at that time the question of church rule over Italian territory had yet to be resolved. The feast was originally on the Sunday before All Saints Day, giving it a heavenly connection, but that is also the height of harvest time in Italy. Celebrating Christ’s “kingship” in a time of abundance feels symbolic of the feast’s true intent – shoring up papal claims to temporal as well as spiritual authority. I like the end of November date better. It is only a month later but we have moved out of harvest and into winter. There is something about marking this time as wind blows across empty fields, trees stripped of green, creation laying fallow as the leaves decompose to provide nutrients come Spring. It speaks to me of what Christ’s reign is really about, not temporal power or a future heaven but our lives reshaped by a transformed heart.

Consider the contrast in the meeting between Jesus and Pilate. I can hear Pilate’s sarcastic sneer as he questions if Jesus is a king, unable to understand what Jesus could mean regarding a kingdom not of this world, so accustomed to the “might makes right” narrative of the Roman Empire with its strong military, small but wealthy elite, most of the population poor or enslaved. He probably thought Jesus was delusional, speaking of a heavenly realm when the defining story of his life, steeped as it was in the Jewish scriptures, was revealing the promise of God’s liberating love in this world. But like how much of the world still works, Pilate knew only power and control. Historically ruthless, he sent Jesus to be tortured by the soldiers, then on sentencing him to be crucified, a punishment intended to frighten the populace into submission, he had a sign placed over Jesus’ head proclaiming him “King of the Jews”, as if to smugly mock the people, saying “This is the best you can do for a king?”

And yet in the passage from Revelation, Jesus is revealed as God’s great liberator, not through dominating power and temporal authority like for Pilate, but in laying down his life in love. In his death, Jesus models for us true kingship, inviting us to share in his priesthood by also letting go of power and “sacrificing” ourselves with him. To understand this, we can look to where this day has been positioned, looking at Advent and then Christmas. We are used to referring to God as almighty but in the birth of Jesus God is all-vulnerable, embracing all it means to be human, completely dependent, needing the care and protection of family, and moreover the child of Jewish parents in a time of oppression, and so not there to conquer but in solidarity

with the conquered. In all of this, I hear the Spirit showing us the path to God's realm as we too choose not power but vulnerability, joined in solidarity to all in need, together as one family.

As we mark Trans Day of Remembrance, I am reminded of siblings who are very much in need. And in Jesus' birth, I see why we are called to reach out in love. In Jesus' birth, we see how God is experienced in a human life, in all human lives, not just ones that follow social expectations. Jesus, who spent his life breaking expectations, shows us that everyone is Beloved, all identities and expressions. Traditionally the church has struggled with this, being more like Pilate than Jesus when it came to those who don't "fit". But as I ponder what God's Reign really means, I hear Jesus inviting those of us who identify as cisgender (our internal sense of gender aligns with our biological sex) to let go of assumptions and be open to other perspectives, to recognize that we have expressed power over others when we project our experiences onto them, even tortured them when we have denied their lived reality. If we believe everyone is Beloved, then we need to create spaces that are safe for people to be authentically themselves. We can apply this as well to age, culture, race, language, sexuality, faith, ability, a critical witness of what is possible when we move past the divisive practices of the past and heal the wounds caused by historic and ongoing injustice, including the wounds of the earth itself. After all, God is ruler of the waves, of all life, not just of humans.

Where does this leave us? With lack of movement on climate change despite the disasters we are seeing, racial division in Canada and not just the States, ongoing transphobic violence, especially toward transwomen of colour, continued reliance on military power around the world, it feels like we keep choosing Pilate's narrative over that of Jesus, and if we're Christian, preferring that his sacrifice be about a future heavenly reward not present spiritual transformation. As we await his return as expressed in our Revelation reading, may we remember that he returns in each of us, not just in the future, inviting us to let go, to let his liberating love change our hearts. It takes a commitment to prayer, to spiritual practice where we can be vulnerable before God. But in this heart space we see God's grace present in us and all others, inviting us to serve others in love, to seek justice where everyone can live what it means to be Beloved, to bring healing to a wounded world. I pray we do this, no longer beholden to power but living out the true meaning of Christ's kingship. May God's grace work within and between us. As it does, God's realm will be born. Amen.