

November 24, 2013

Last after Pentecost - Reign of Christ

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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## DISSONANCE

*Dissonance* is technically a lack of harmony among musical notes, but also refers to various states of incongruity in our experience.

On this Last Sunday after Pentecost, widely known as 'Christ the King Sunday' I experience some degree of dissonance. I expect if you ever gave it any thought many of you would experience dissonance today as well. Governor Oglethorpe could have celebrated Christ the King without irony had it yet been promulgated. He might well have imagined a colony in which the worthy poor could work off their debts free from the burdens of rum, lawyers, slaves and papists. (Utopia perhaps, though not a vision to be realized in any respect.) But he would have had no notion at all of his colony without a King. The Sunday of Christ the King came to us from the Romans when the feast was introduced in 1925 by Pope Pius XI who was alarmed by the growing nationalism and secularism he saw all around him and wanted to raise up Christ as a unifying vision for all people. In 1970 Roman Catholics, began celebrating the feast as the last Sunday of the Christian year when Pope Paul VI wanted to raise up the eschatological or future or end times vision of Christ's Kingship made manifest on earth. IN 1983 we began joining in with the advent of the Revised Common Lectionary in use today. I'm surprised that we took to this so readily as you may recall that it was tough to get Bishops consecrated for the newly formed Episcopal Church after the American revolutionary boot was launched at General Cornwallis' rump and he was sent packing back to King and Country. We are called the Episcopal Church because it was Bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church agreed to consecrate Bishop Seabury. They are called the Scottish Episcopal Church to distinguish themselves from the national Church of Scotland which is Presbyterian to this day. Because they were not a national church, Scottish Bishops did not have to swear allegiance to the crown. They agreed to consecrate Bishop Seabury if we adopted the name 'Episcopal' and agreed to use their *Book of Common Prayer*.

My sense of dissonance is ameliorated only slightly because *we* actually and officially call today 'Reign of Christ Sunday' in an attempt to emphasize the relational aspect of the reign rather than the positional authority of the ruler. We are trying to emphasize the promise that in time the whole universe will be in alignment with the Messiah and so peace with justice, the essence of salvation, will be available and made manifest for all. Our lectionary takes this further and reminds us that Jesus' throne is a cross, that power is made manifest in weakness, and that kingly titles are the source of irony. "If you are King of the Jews, save yourself." the thief asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his 'kingdom' which might be better translated 'reign'. His authority comes from his life of integrity and not the nobility of his birth. And the vision of this feast is likewise about relational reality rather than temporal power.

I confess to a personal affection for one particular constitutional monarchy, but my most profound religious and political sentiments lead me to a real experience of dissonance on this day. And while I'm being honest, I'm aware that dissonance is something that is not an experience limited to today for me. There is *much* in our regular worship that leads many in our parish, but certainly in our wider culture, to experience such dissonance when engaging our worship. I can and have found ways to understand teach and explain what we are doing and why. In the same way I can get to grips with what the word 'kingdom' is essentially about in our tradition going all the way back to Jeremiah and his image of the Shepherd-King as embodying 'righteousness' or 'right relation'. But I'm aware that this cultural and spiritual experience of dissonance is both growing and crying out for attention. Over the next year or so, I will initiate and find a way to have some broad conversation about worship, --about orienting ourselves or being turned toward what really matters such that it shapes our lives and calls us to greater integrity, courage, generosity, freedom and so on—a conversation about where and when we worship and how that is related, to what we attempt to do here on Sunday mornings.

In the meantime however I want us to think about how we deal with experiences of dissonance when we come across them and become aware of them in our lives.

1. Most of the time, confronted with dissonance, we seek harmony. We want to put things right in some sense. We want to get back to normal and away from the discomfort. If I don't find myself enjoying the discordant music of Arnold Schoenberg then I don't have to listen to it. I avoid unwelcome experiences of dissonance, and probably write it off as a matter of taste. In the same way we might, without knowing it, find what happens here on Sunday mornings somehow less compelling, less essential, less obviously gratifying, than we would like and so it becomes easier to skip it on this day or that (in spite of numerous sermons reminding us of the importance of worship as a disciplined and essential practice if we wish to grow in faith.)

2. If, instead, we think about it rather than just allow our subconscious reactions to govern our choices, we will frequently find ourselves looking for technical solutions to our discomfort. We will try and fix the problem to make it go away. "It's the music or the organ." "It's the preaching." (Really??). "The pews wreak havoc on my back." "The coffee is better at Starbucks." (Indisputable.) But these all fall in the category of technical problems which can be solved by changing this or that, rather than as spiritual challenges, calling us to re-examination of what we do and why we do it.

3. A third response is to find some kind of revelation in our dissonant experience. As a schoolboy I acted in a lot of plays and the plays of Bertolt Brecht were popular because they tended to have large casts and so just about everyone in a particular house could be involved in a production. Brecht did not want his audiences losing themselves in the drama without considering the meaning and was known to walk on stage and interrupt the drama asking people what they thought was going on. He wrote *Life of Galileo* among other plays. That play was not just history about people being able to embrace a new idea, but was also Brecht's commentary in opposition to the Nationalist, Socialist and Fascist realities of Nazism. Dissonance can be revelation and so a call to move deeper into our experience and so, often, deeper into God.

4. Leaving a fourth possible response which is to embrace the experience, finding for example, that this day is not simply a minor irritant, but a reminder of our most fundamental hope that there can be peace with justice for all people, that God is working God's purposes out.

Dissonance is often a prelude to a deeper grasp of the reality of grace and real change; a deeper grasp of the reality that we are part of God's enterprise as we come more fully into righteousness or right relation with the source of the universe and the source of our own lives. I don't know where a broader conversation about worship will lead but for today I hear again the call to right relationship leading back to the Man of Integrity, the Son of Man, the Complete Human, the King of the Jews and Christ the King suffering the consequence of human greed, power, veniality and sin, unveiling a better way open to all.

In a time of silence for prayer I invite you to listen for dissonance in your own life. It may be ringing in your ears or may be a distant discordant note somewhere, but in any event, listen, don't rush to fix it or make it go away, and trust that in the listening you will be led more deeply into the source of your own life. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...