

Circuit Resource - Sunday 21st November 2021 - Reign of Christ

Call to worship

Grace to you and peace
from him who is
and who was
and who is to come. (*Rev 1:4*)
We open our hearts, minds and lives
to receive God's love in Christ.

STF 254/H&P 138 - Seek ye first the kingdom of God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFxZeY2D5tc>

<p>1 Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you ; Allelu-, alleluia : <i>Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, allelu-, alleluia !</i></p> <p>2 Ask, and it shall be given unto you ; seek and ye shall find ; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you ; Allelu-, alleluia :</p>	<p>3 We shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord ; Allelu-, alleluia :</p> <p>Karen Lafferty (<i>b.</i> 1948)</p> <p><i>The verses may be sung in canon with the refrain. There should be no pause between verses when sung in this way.</i></p>
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Prayer of adoration

God of all times and places,
God of beginning and end,
You brought all of creation into being,
and you will bring all things to completion.
We adore you.

Out of your great love for the world,
you gave your Son Jesus,
who set aside the power and kingly glory that was his,
to become a servant.
By word and deed, he proclaimed your kingdom,
a kingdom of justice and joy, mercy and grace.
We worship you.

Holy Spirit resting upon us,
fill us with your gentle peace,
your gracious love,
and your merciful hope.
May the kingdom come.
Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God, you alone are the King of all creation.
Yet, we confess that we act as though we are the ones who rule the world.
Forgive us, Lord.
We long for your kingdom to come.
Forgive us if we lose faith and give up hope.
Help us to recognize your reign,
that we may be faithful followers in your kingdom.
We pray in the name of Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

New Testament reading - Revelation 1:4-8

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you

and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come,
and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead,
and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,

⁶and made us to be a kingdom,

priests serving his God and Father,

to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him, even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God,
who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

StF 331 - King of kings, majesty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QXgWQbFNBM>

(or H&P 74 - At the name of Jesus)

<p>1 King of kings, majesty, God of heaven living in me. Gentle Saviour, closest Friend, Strong Deliverer, Beginning and End, all within me falls at your throne.</p> <p><i>Your majesty, I can but bow ; I lay my all before you now. In royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve your majesty.</i></p>	<p>2 Earth and heaven worship you, Love eternal, faithful and true, who bought the nations, ransomed souls, brought this sinner near to your throne ; all within me cries out in praise.</p> <p><i>Your majesty, I can but bow ; I lay my all before you now. In royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve your majesty, I live to serve your majesty.</i></p> <p>Jarrold Cooper</p>
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Gospel reading - John 18: 33-37

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again,

summoned Jesus, and asked him,

'Are you the King of the Jews?'

³⁴ Jesus answered,

'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'

³⁵ 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?'

³⁶ 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.'

³⁷ 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.'

Sermon

Who's in charge?

Introduction

I used to have a poster on my study noticeboard - maybe you've seen something similar - which said:

Do not feel totally,
personally,
irrevocably responsible
for everything.
That's my job.
Love, God.

A minister friend tells of the occasion he was chairing a meeting, and someone said to him, "Of course, you're the minister - you're in charge of the church." And my friend responded, "No, I'm not, but I'm here to make sure no-one else is."

Who's in charge?

During the last few weeks, as the world's leaders have met at COP26, the question could be asked, "Who's in charge of the world's future?"

Who's in charge of the church,
of the world,
of our lives?

This is the challenge of today's scripture, for today is the end of the Christian year - the last Sunday before Advent, and in recent years called the Reign of Christ.

It's a Sunday when the appointed readings are about kingship, kingdom and power.

What kind of kingdom?

Pilate's questions to Jesus were in effect, a conversation about kingdoms and power.

Pilate was a powerful man, and the representative of an enormously powerful emperor and empire.

Faced with this Jewish teacher, condemned by the leaders of his own community, Pilate was anxious to find out about how an apparently innocent man came to be appearing before him charged with treason.

Pilate asked Jesus,

'Are you the King of the Jews?'

"My kingdom," said Jesus, "doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king." (*John 18: 36 The Message*)

Caught between an angry mob, his loyalty to the emperor, and his gut feeling that Jesus was innocent, Pilate nevertheless succumbed to crowd pressure.

It has been suggested that 'when Pilate hears Jesus say, "my kingdom is not of this world" and then sends Jesus to be crucified as guilty of treason against the Roman Empire, it is *not* because he fails to understand Jesus: it is because he *does* understand Jesus.

His questions about kingship initially, could be understood as questions about Jesus wanting to overthrow Herod, or even the emperor, and seize power.

But the kingdom Jesus proclaims is not like other earthly kingdoms.

However, Jesus is not attempting to overthrow Caesar in order to take his throne and rule in his place.

The power of God in Jesus is not just a *greater* power than all other empires.

The kingdom of God is something radical and new.

Jesus' kingdom is not a place, but a perspective,

not an established rule, but a living model of how to live life;

it is embodied not in a geographical location, but embodied in a person,

the King, Jesus.

Jesus' kingdom can be anywhere, any time.
It is present wherever the character and values of Jesus are lived out.

What character and values?

Jesus declares the kingdom to be good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners and those who are enslaved, sight for the blind, and welcome and healing even for the despised.

In this new kingdom everything is defined from the bottom up, not top down.

Those who are greatest in this kingdom of Jesus, are those who serve.

Perhaps one way of understanding the radical character of this King and kingdom, is to imagine the symbols of state:

- Jesus' crown is a crown of thorns;
- his royal robe is stained with his blood;
- his banquet table is laden with bread, broken, and wine, spilled;
- his palace is a rock-hewn tomb, the stone rolled away;
- his armies are the lost, the unloved, the forgotten;
- his regalia are a basin and towel;
- and his throne is a Cross.

In its simplest terms, the kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied, is what life would be like on earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not.

There are people, both outside and inside the Church, who find the metaphor of God as King offensive, or at least uncomfortable.

It suggests hierarchy, authoritarianism, and patriarchy – and indeed, through the centuries, many have adopted this image of the Kingdom of God and used it for their own ends.

But when we look at the Servant King, Jesus, we are confronted by a radically different kind of king and kingdom.

Who's in charge?

Who's in charge of the church, of our lives?

Is it Christ the King?

Do we answer, 'God's in charge'

and then continue to live our lives, functioning as though the gospel is not true?

Do we say 'Jesus is Lord', and then follow the rules of earthly empires?

In the kingdom of God, where Jesus is in charge,

mercy is more important than punishment,

giving away is more important than accumulating;

service and obedience, rather than success and winning, are the

values of this kingdom.

Sacrifice, rather than power, is the sign of the King.

Where God reigns, the citizens of the kingdom love their enemies,

priority is given to care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful.

A clash of kingdoms

I have spoken on other occasions about how I once got into trouble with a congregation for suggesting that praying "Your kingdom come" is subversive.

'*Subversive*' means, of course, the overturning, upsetting, or overthrow of power.

But the word is usually used of extremists, anarchists and seditious groups, likely to use violence to achieve their ends.

But the kingdom of God *is* subversive - it seeks to undermine and overthrow the principalities and powers of this world, to subvert them - but *not* by force, *not* by might, but by love, sacrifice and prayer.

Historians tell us that for the first hundred years or so of the Christian movement, the Church was invisible to most people in the Roman empire. But then in the next few centuries, "Christians earned a reputation as an alternate and anti-social community that existed on the margins of the state. Christians were thought to

be fanatical, seditious, obstinate, and defiant. Tacitus called them "haters of mankind." They scorned long-held Roman religious traditions. Many of their adherents came from the lower classes and seemed gullible. They refused military service, and met for clandestine rites rumoured to include cannibalism, ritual murder, and incest. in the words of one early critic, the Christians "do not understand their civic duty." In his view they actively undermined society with their indifference to civic affairs. Some critics even blamed Christians for the fall of Rome." [Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (1984)]

When Jesus insisted that his kingdom was "not of this world" he did not mean that it was merely spiritual, or relegated to a future age beyond history or in heaven.

The kingdom of God was a direct challenge to the Roman Empire where Caesar was Lord. Their two kingdoms clashed.

The clash of kingdoms in Pilate's conversation with Jesus is as real today. We face that same choice, the same competing loyalties.

Who's in charge in the church?

Do we give lip service to God and to the guidance and power of God but function as if we are doing it all ourselves?

How many of our church business meetings operate with a deep sense of God's presence in our midst guiding, leading, convincing, and convicting.

Or, are we more apt to run our business meetings in a more parliamentary style and we "bless" the proceedings with a little prayer?

Who's in charge in our lives?

Do we pay lip service to the kingship of Christ, but live as though it were not true?

Do we say that God is in control, and then fret and live as if it were all up to us, as if there were no God, as though we believe that if anything positive is going to happen to me, I am the one who needs to make it happen?

In the first chapter of the book of Revelation, we read:

"To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests serving his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." (Rev. 1: 5b-6)

We are made to be a kingdom, that demonstrates all that Jesus lived and taught the kingdom of God to be. In God's power and name, we make it happen here and now. We look for the signs of God's reign - and we join in.

The Bible says God loves humankind so much he sent his only Son to show us how to live, and then to die for us, to prove that absolutely nothing would change his mind.

Singing the Faith 445 (by John Pantry) declares:

He came to earth, not to be served,
But gave His life to be a ransom for many;
The Son of God, the Son of man,
He shared our pain and bore our sins in His body.

*King of kings and Lord of lords,
I lift my voice in praise;
Such amazing love, but I do believe
This King has died for me.*

Thanks be to God.

StF 445 He Came to Earth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wiazTDTTz4>

<p>1 He came to earth, not to be served, but gave his life to be a ransom for many ; the Son of God, the Son of man, he shared our pain and bore our sins in his body. <i>King of kings and Lord of lords, I lift my voice in praise, such amazing love, but I do believe this King has died for me.</i></p> <p>2 And so I stand, a broken soul, to see the pain that I have brought to Jesus ; and yet each heart will be consoled, to be made new, the joy of all believers.</p>	<p>3 And from now on, through all my days, I vow to live each moment here for Jesus ; not looking back, but giving praise for all my Lord has done for this believer.</p> <p>John Pantry (b. 1946)</p>
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Prayers of intercession

Let us pray.

We pray for your kingdom to come
in the worldwide communities of those who follow Jesus Christ –
may our lives enthrone him.

Spirit of the living God:
may your kingdom come.

We pray for your kingdom to come in the nations of our world
and in their leadership;
for your kingdom's values to take root and grow;
that care for the earth and all your creation may be paramount,
and that every person be respected as a beloved child of God.

Spirit of the living God:
may your kingdom come.

We pray for your kingdom to come in our neighbourhood,
our places of work and our homes;
in situations of joy, and in places of pain and sadness.
We remember before you people and places especially known to us
(Silence)

Spirit of the living God:
may your kingdom come.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

StF 272 - From heaven you came, helpless babe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCAdWs-ZyEk>

1 From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

*This is our God, the Servant King,
he calls us now to follow him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

2 There in the garden of tears
my heavy load he chose to bear ;
his heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.

3 Come see his hands and his feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered.

4 So let us learn how to serve
and in our lives enthrone him,
each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.

Graham Kendrick (*b.* 1950)

Blessing

The glory of God the Father be about you and within you.

The love of Christ our Lord sustain you and fill you.

The power of the Holy Spirit inspire you and guide you.

And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit,

be amongst us and remain with us always.

Amen.