

Year B, Reign of Christ
November 21, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“...and an Ancient One took his throne,
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.”

I don't know about you, but that image is not at all how I hold God in my imagination. I don't imagine God as a human-like being, certainly not in any remotely physical way, let alone an old white-haired guy on a fiery throne, but that image is powerful isn't it? Doesn't it fill you with a bit of tingly awe? Like the seraphim and cherubim in Isaiah singing back and forth “Holy. Holy. Holy.” While the hem of God's robe fills the temple? An awe-some vision in the truest sense of the word. If it doesn't, you might want to try and let it.

It continues:

“I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.”

“And He came to the Ancient One...” As Christians, we understand that what the Daniel prophesied in the second century BCE was fulfilled in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. That is not, however, the only conclusion one could draw from these writings. This is called supersessionism. That is the proclivity of Christians to assume that the history of the Israel laid out in the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Well, that is true, the “one like a human being” in Daniel, and when we hear Isaiah’s song, “For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...” we understand that to mean Jesus Christ, but we just need to remember that that is not the *only* conclusion a reasonable and faithful person can come to. Christ is how we understand these writings to be fulfilled. *We.* (period – full stop).

Today, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, we commemorate the Reign of Christ, or in more patriarchal language, Christ the King. This is a modern feast of the church, introduced by Pope Pious XI in his 1925 encyclical *Quas Primas* (In the First).

1925. Europe. What was going on? Well the at least nominally Christian European world was reeling from the bloodiest episode in human history: World War 1. Royal houses were falling, Germany staggered under the weight of Versailles, nationalist movements were on the rise, the Bolshevik revolution was turning out *not* to be a flash in the pan. Pius XI wrote, “...manifold evils in the world were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics: and we said further, that as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations.”

The Pope was very concerned that a traumatized Europe was grasping for meaning, grasping for something to hope for, for someone to give hope, and answers, and a way forward. And he was so very right. The Pope was very concerned that even the very best of people are susceptible to false prophets, charlatans and purveyors of snake-oil. He was so

very right. He knew, like Jesus warned us last week, “many will come in my name... do not be led astray...”

I look around our country now, I look into my own life, and the life of this community and the intersecting communities we all inhabit, and after 20 months of this pandemic, is this the 5th wave of infections we are seeing? We don't have an Ypres salient like the Belgians, or a nation of serfs trying to form a workers paradise like the Soviets, or punishing sanctions like the Germans... we don't have it nearly as bad as Europe did in the years leading up to 1925, but don't think that we, the world, are not in a traumatizing season right now, and there are a while lot more humans around now. The world is reeling. The Dutch police opened fire on an anti-COVID-restriction-protest-turned-riot yesterday in Rotterdam. The Dutch! There was violence in Portland, Oregon over the Rittenhouse verdict. Supply chains are upside down. Millions aren't working for fear of COVID, for lack of childcare, (not enough child care workers and centers, and it is hard to hold a job if you are back and forth with a third-grader on quarantine-forced remote learning), and for realizing maybe that poverty on your own terms is better than poverty while working a meaningless, stultifying job. We had the fifth and sixth cases in under two weeks reported at Brooksville Elementary. That is nearly 10% of the student body this past two weeks.

Humans, our societies, are a natural system. Meaning we can observe human systems as we would other natural systems, because it is one, we are a natural component of the creation. A friend's brother was working on his PhD in materials science some years ago. He wrote an algorithm that helped to generate models of certain molecules. I don't know how the connection was made, but somehow he noticed that his algorithm was relevant in modeling fluctuations in certain currency markets. And I am sure he is not the only materials scientist employed by a Swiss bank. My doctoral thesis on the theology of sustainable agriculture was predicated on the idea that human created agrarian systems are mirrors (models) of the larger creation, and in the microcosm of farming (the basis of human civilization), we can learn a lot about God the world and everything.

We are coming to understand that 1.5 °C increase in global temperature will flood island nations, burn arid ones (both are happening in the US), create refugee chaos and destabilize nations, regions, and continents. We know that is coming and we are just beginning to sense how big a change in our climate can follow a seemingly small change in temperature. How much change has our society undergone over the past 20 months? The past 5 years? What are the consequences of such rapid change across human-natural systems? Across a town? A state? Our nation? The world?

Just think about your life. What was the pre-COVID Thanksgiving 2019 like for you? How does it compare to what you expect to see next week? Advent starts next week. What did Christmas Eve 2018 here at St. Francis look like? (That was the last “normal” Christmas eve in this community, the last one you all gathered together with a rector in place). This year we may have figured out the hymn thing... if COVID exposure happens when you are within 6 feet of a carrier for 15 minutes, if we sing the final hymn and leave, no one would be a close contact, right? *Silent Night* here we come!

All these changes, all these small shifts in how we live in the world add up. I know I am feeling pretty discombobulated, pretty unsure of what is “normal” as I wrote in the eClare this week. I feel flatfooted. I received a stunningly small number of calls for assistance for my first 18 months. Not a single call about heating assistance last winter. I had three last week, and it isn’t cold yet. With the end of the supplemental unemployment insurance and the nominal end of the eviction moratorium, my discretionary fund balance is rapidly diminishing. The Christmas Fair is the source of funding form the discretionary fund. It was canceled a second year in a row, for obvious reasons, and even when my another issue about the discretionary account came up in the vestry meeting, my mind was somewhere else and I didn’t have a discussion about what to do about how much it has dwindled. Flatfooted. Are you finding your mind all over the place? Discombobulated? (Well at least I just gave you an idea about end of year tax giving – the discretionary fund. Or if you have a more complicated tax situation, the steeple repair exceeded the grant we

received, and our out of pocket is \$13,000 more than hoped for. We have it in our building reserve fund, but then we won't have much of a building reserve fund). See, I can be focused, but those moments feel more fleeting as of late.

Pope Pius IX called for a commemoration of the Reign of Christ to remind us of our center. Our center as a people of God. Our center as the Body of Christ. And that center? It is not a trick question: Jesus Christ! Pius wrote:

“Christ must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. Christ must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to Jesus alone. Christ must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.”

Where is our center, here? Again, not a trick question: Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ permeates (or should permeate) everything we do, and right now the thing we are doing the most of is Worship. Everything we do as a church always radiates out from this table, radiates out from our gathering around the presence of Jesus Christ. *And* that isn't all we do as a praying people. It is hard not being in person for meetings. It is hard that some of us are consigned to Zoom. (It is also a gift [if the sound works], vastly superior to no church, but hard). It is hard missing the conversations before meetings start, walking together to the parking lot afterwards, seeing someone's cool new shoes, or how much weight they have lost, or being able to notice a new haircut.

We've held it together quite amazingly. Your commitment and generosity have funded us well. Two highly successful annual giving campaigns in a row is no small thing in the contemporary church. We hired a coordinator of family, children and youth ministry – The Rev. Dr. Regina Christianson! Yay! The steeple was saved. Our outreach work continues. Our adult formation continues. We might get to sing soon.

Everything we are going through, at home, on the roads, trails and beaches or the peninsula, across Maine and the US and the world, everything can serve to remind us how

desperately we need the rock of God on which to build our lives. Today is a day to remember, as desperately as they needed to remember in 1925, the primacy of Jesus Christ at the center. The Reign of Christ was a reminder arising out of a previous winter of our human discontent, a reminder that we far too easily forget what is most important. That we forget, in this perishing world that which is unperishing. That we forget in the changes and chances of this life, God's eternal changelessness. We forget, as we pray in the burial office, "all of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." AMEN