

November 25, 2018
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 23:1-7
Psalms 132:1-13 (14-19)
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

In the Muslim tradition, there are said to be 99 names of God. This number and the names themselves are from the Qur'an. The 99 names of God are also known as the 99 attributes of God, and so each name is an attribute—a quality, a characteristic, a trait. Taken together, these attributes describe who God is and how God interacts with creation. Among the 99 are: the Kind, the Loving, and the Wise; the Pardoner and the Avenger; the Giver of Life and the Bringer of Death.

We Christians also name God, though we don't have a list, and therefore we are perhaps less mindful about it. Pay close attention, and on any Sunday you will notice various names for God sprinkled throughout our liturgy. This happens to be a Sunday on which we name God quite specifically: we recognize today as "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ" Sunday. That theme was articulated in our Processional Hymn, in which Jesus bears scepter and throne, triumph and victory. "The King" is, by the way, one of Islam's 99 names of God. For Christians, Christ the King is a fairly recent liturgical observance, having begun in the Roman Catholic Church only in 1925. Though it has since been picked up by Anglicans and Lutherans, it's not even in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

I take some comfort from that as I confess my own discomfort with the image of Christ wearing a crown. Maybe that's because it's a lot easier to warm up to names like Most Gracious or Most Merciful. Or maybe it's because we live in a representative democracy that takes pride in having rebelled against a monarchy. In John's Gospel, Jesus himself seems reluctant to assume the mantle of kingship, at least as this world understands it. Still, since we're here, maybe it's worth taking a closer look at Jesus as Christ the King.

The liturgical year that began last November, on the First Sunday of Advent, ends this week. It's the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the liturgical year. For the months following Pentecost, the Sunday Gospel readings are mostly about Jesus' activity in the world. Today is the last Sunday of that lengthy period. Next Sunday we head again into Advent, the season of hopeful anticipation of the first coming of our messiah. Perhaps it's fitting to end this liturgical year with a dash of hopeful anticipation of his second coming.

One's anticipation might be less than hopeful if one's only conception of Jesus' return is a literal reading of the Book of Revelation. The bloody vengeance described there is something with which we might rightfully struggle. Therefore it's important to again remind ourselves that the Book of Revelation is part of a body of apocalyptic literature. Revelation was written not as prediction for some distant future, but rather as commentary about the then time and place. Its author observed the political climate of the day, recognized it as cruel and corrupt, and invoked an intervening Jesus as a disruptive force.

The Gospels also place Jesus within his socio-political setting; we must locate him there to understand the Gospels. The Gospels quite consistently portray Jesus pushing back against patterns of cruelty and corruption propagated by religious and political leaders. We might even hear in this the naming of Jesus as “the Disrupter.” That may be another way to think about Christ the King.

The Jesus of the Gospels was and continues to be an intervening disruptive force. We might even read the Book of Revelation as an invitation to consider our own socio-political context, ask where it fosters cruelty and corruption, and then imagine how Jesus the Disrupter might intervene.

Maybe you’ve seen the movie *Miss Congeniality*. In it, Sandra Bullock stars as FBI agent Gracie Hart, who is embedded in the fictional Miss United States beauty pageant in order to ferret out a domestic terrorist. Gracie is more tomboy than princess, and she retains her rough edges despite the efforts of an expert pageant groomer. Gracie hilariously makes it through the swimsuit portion of the competition, and the next scene opens with a close-up of Miss Hawaii in an evening gown. Without further setup, she says, “I would have to say, world peace.” Then follows a close-up of Miss Texas, who says, “Definitely, world peace.” Then Miss California, who says, “That’s easy, world peace.” Then Miss New York: “World peace.” Finally, we see pageant emcee Stan and our heroine, Gracie. It’s then that we hear Stan voice the question the women have been answering: “What is the one most important thing our society needs?” We all know it’s an old joke, that pageant hosts always ask some variation of this question, and pageant contestants always reply, “World peace.” But FBI agent Gracie Hart replies, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan.” The camera shifts to the members of the audience, who are sitting in confused silence. After a five-second pause, Gracie realizes she can’t possibly leave it there. “And world peace,” she adds. The crowd erupts.¹

“What is the one most important thing our society needs?” No matter how ridiculous it may sound coming out of the mouth of a beauty pageant contestant, if you take that questions seriously, I bet your answer really is something like, “World peace.” World peace, and food for everyone who is hungry. World peace, and shelter for everyone who is homeless. World peace, and health care for everyone who is sick.

Despite our differences, I expect that’s what most people, in our heart of hearts, are *really* hopefully anticipating. God the Nourisher, God the Shelterer, God the Healer: this is the one to whom we pray and for whom we act.

There are Christians who read the Book of Revelation for clues about the supposedly coming apocalypse. Some watch for signs, and a few go so far as to predict a date. Those dates come, and those dates go—at least they have so far. Apparently someone predicted that the rapture—the beginning of the end of the world as we know it—would happen last June. It didn’t happen, but another date will come along. Every prediction is a warning to sinners like me to live in fear and trembling; my fate is sealed if I don’t change my ways.

While those folks and I disagree on the details, I expect there is some change left in me; I hope that my faith is always subject to practice and growth. I fear that we have all been given a glimpse of the end of the world as we know it, and it looks a lot like the wildfires in California. Climate change is happening. It occurs to me that a little fear and trembling might very well be in order. World peace, and everything that goes with it, is at stake.

And so maybe this is a good day to meet Christ the King. We need salvation as much as humans ever have, and maybe time truly is drawing short. Jesus the Disrupter is calling us into the fellowship those who, over the ages, have disrupted in his name. For the second advent of Christ the King—for the second coming of Jesus the Disrupter—may we cultivate hopeful anticipation and even hopeful preparation.

Notes

¹ *Miss Congeniality*, directed by Donald Petrie, Warner Bros., 2000. This scene is available for streaming on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1ZOWwW2agQ> (accessed 22 November 2013).