

The Reign of Christ
November 22, 20015

"WHO RULES YOU?"
By Mary Anne Biggs

Revelation 1:4-7 ~ John 18:33-38

We are ruled by the clock, aren't we? I've noticed some of you must have important places to be right at 11:00 on Sundays because about five `til, you start looking at your watches and gathering your things. And it's not just our clocks we must obey. Our planners, our checkbooks, our families, our jobs ... all of these make demands on us which we cannot refuse. To be sure, we have some choice in the matter. We can skip the meetings, go bankrupt, abandon our families, lose our jobs. But basically, we are all slaves to a set of arrangements that we chose in the first place ... which now rule our lives.

Other demands besides these external voices rule over us, too. We are haunted with internal voices which push us in this direction and that ... our own crying needs, our addictions ... how many people are ruled by a bottle or a pack of cigarettes or their favorite ice cream or their own longing loneliness? Add to those our histories ... old family stuff internalized and self-applied. I know a woman whose mother on many occasions in her childhood called her "you stupid little fool" and now, as a grown woman she finds herself calling herself that whenever she makes a mistake. The despised and rejected become the self-despised and self-rejected, ruled by a deep inescapable inner sense of shame. And often, we don't even realize these inner voices are ruling us ... telling us what we can and cannot do and dare not even try.

Somewhere in the mix of all these competing commanding voices is the voice of Christ. Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ and declare him Lord of all, Sovereign over all time and space, cosmic King and Ruler over our own lives. As the Seer of the Revelation says it, "*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, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*" (Rev 1:5-6). But how does that work, really? I mean, is it merely a platitude? Or is it a recognition of what ought to be and sometimes is and maybe someday finally will be? Can you truly say that Jesus rules in your life? Or is his voice just one more in the mix of the many voices which demand you to obey and send you running off in every direction at once?

We have the perfect picture of this command conflict in the story of Pilate from the gospel of John. All the other gospels bear witness to how it happened. Jesus' followers called him "Messiah," a word which meant "anointed King" throughout Israel's history ... a term as political as it was religious in Jesus' day. The chief priests and scribes brought Jesus to Pilate, Caesar's representative ruler over the land. "This man claims he's our King," they told Pilate. So Pilate tried Jesus as a revolutionary seeking political power against Rome. But when he interviewed Jesus, it was clear that Jesus had no political goals and was innocent of these charges. Still,

Jesus did not reject the title of "Messiah" or "King." Pilate, angry at being manipulated by the Jewish leaders into getting involved in an internal religious dispute, tried to thwart their plans. But when he could not, he gave in to keep the peace. He used all the face saving insults he could ... like washing his hands, declaring Jesus innocent while condemning him to die, and placing the insulting placard, "King of the Jews" over Jesus' cross, in three languages. But he caved in to the pressure. It was ironic ... the most powerful man in the land duped into doing the bidding of the people he was supposed to dominate. And of course, there was an even greater irony. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, *"One of the many things this story tells us is that Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix."*

That's how Pilate got dragged into the crucifixion of Jesus. But John has taken this historical account of Jesus' judgement before Pilate and transformed it into a picture of how we make decisions between competing demands and how Jesus' rule works in our midst. Our gospel reading from John today gives us a brief moment in the long conversation where Pilate keeps moving back and forth between the Jewish leaders on the outside and Jesus on the inside. We see all the polar pressures that Pilate must face ... his career versus his integrity ... popular opinion versus his own values ... the public peace versus inner peace ... innocence versus guilt ... power versus service ... expediency versus justice ... self-interest versus universal interest ... the temporal versus the eternal ... the secular versus the spiritual. He is truly tormented in having to choose ... and pressured by so many competing truth claims that he is finally reduced to asking, "What is truth?" Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, is it possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat? Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody.

The crowd outside is noisy, manipulative, fixed on achieving its goal no matter who gets hurt. The Jesus within is calm, in control, God-centered and self-possessed, acting out of integrity with a consistent purpose. Pilate is pulled between them, moves back and forth, but finally gives in to the worst voices instead of the best, and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Is John trying to show us how we are like Pilate? Is he trying to say that we also give in too easily to the noise of the crowd and the voices of expediency instead of following the quiet commands of Christ who calls us to obey a higher reality towards a greater good? What does it mean to let Christ rule over us?

I have to admit, obedience is not one of my favorite words. I'm independent by nature. I don't really like being commanded by anybody. I am a free adult. I don't like anybody telling me what I have to do. But I have all these other demands to obey, and most of them are good. I do want to obey God. I do want to follow Jesus. And I believe that is a day to day, moment to moment response to his love in my life ... not just a once a week, whenever I think about it, tip of the cap in his direction while I do whatever feels good, whatever I please, whatever is popular at the moment, whatever everybody else may want me to do.

What does it mean to obey Christ? Is it simply a matter of following some rules, say, whatever the Bible tells us to do? I read this week the average Christian owns nine Bibles. That's right, nine Bibles. The Bible publishers compete in the market to get people to buy a family Bible, a study Bible, children's Bibles, Bibles in different translations, Bibles with different covers, gift Bibles, computer Bibles. We have no shortage of Bibles! But who reads them?

I know a lot of people with a lot of Bibles, and they do read them. But they cannot possibly understand what it means because they use the Bible to feel good about themselves and judge others ... when everything I know about the Bible says it should be the other way around. And, oh my Lord, I see so many preachers who have had maybe one or two seminary courses on scripture and are otherwise self-taught presenting themselves to congregations and television audiences as experts on God, and people who think they are following Christ are following them. So, as much as I believe in scripture as the Word of God, simply obeying my interpretation of scripture ... or yours or somebody else's ... is not the same as obeying Christ.

Then is it more a matter of obeying the Spirit of Christ within us ... each of us our own individual guide obeying the inner god? Ultimately, I think this is true, because ultimately each person is spiritually free and responsible to choose for him- or herself. But the danger, of course, is a subjective, hyper-individualism in which there is no truth except what you decide is true for you. And, as Jeremiah observed, the human heart is desperately corrupt. We naturally, easily, decide Jesus wants us to do whatever we want to do in the first place. That is why we need community where we listen to one another and call one another to accountability. Our image of Christ can be amorphous and subjective. But Christ in the flesh and blood people of the church is very real indeed. I agree with Brian Stoffregen: *"It may be that the most important aspect of declaring Christ as King, is not our understanding of Jesus' lordship -- who he is and what he does; but our life with each other under that lordship."* Still, the individual stands in balance with the community ... because communities can be wrong and occasionally need individual prophets to stand against them.

Then how do we obey Christ? Perhaps it is all of these: scripture, Spirit, and community. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesuits, set out three guiding principles for those who would participate with what God is doing in the world. First, you must develop *a passionate commitment to follow God*. You aren't going to obey Christ if obeying Christ simply isn't a priority. Second, you must adopt *an attitude of indifference towards all other drives and desires*, such as wealth, prestige, and prosperity. Otherwise, these drives and demands will inevitably pull you away from what is best. And third, you must cultivate *a deep sensitivity to the ways and being of God*, through prayer, meditation, scripture, worship, and service. This is not a diversion from daily life to a separate sphere of religion in some kind of dualistic division of the spiritual from the real ... but an integration of faith into every aspect of your being and every moment of your breathing. *"The spiritual life is first of all a life,"* said Thomas Merton. And in John's gospel, Jesus does not say *"I have come that they might have an occasional spiritual highs."* He says, *"I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10).

We can learn to listen above all to the quiet inner voice of Christ amidst all the voices that call to us and command us to obey ... and make his voice first and most important of all. But there is a

comforting word in John's story of a man who did the wrong thing and obeyed the wrong voices at a critical moment. There is no doubt in the story who is in control. It is not Caesar's man in Jerusalem. He is torn by indecision. It is not the mob outside. They are driven by their own lust for power to the point where they will even swear allegiance to Caesar to get Jesus killed, something Pilate never could have made them do if he tried. The one in control through this story is Jesus. God rules, and Christ's kingdom comes, whether Pilate joins it or not. The rule of Christ is inevitable, and that is a grace. We are called to participate in it, and that is a choice, but it takes the strength of soul to say no to all the other voices calling you to obey.

And so the Christian year in worship ends with our proclamation that Jesus is the Sovereign ruler of all history and every place ... of all humanity here and gone and yet to come. Though all may not recognize it yet, one day "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God." We make this claim not in imperialistic arrogance against those who believe differently, but out of our belief that Jesus, the Christ, who "came not to be served but to serve," "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving God," will bring all people into the loving circle of God's mercy. You see, this proclamation is less about God's claim on the rest of the world ... than it is about God's claims on us who hold that belief ... and whether or not we will truly lay down our lives at his feet and give him his crown rights over us moment by moment, day by day. Beyond all the voices that demand our attention, our obedience, our loyalty, we are to listen to the quiet, calm, inner voice of Christ calling us to choose life with each little choice we make. So who rules you? Isn't it about time we, who call ourselves by Jesus' name, let Jesus rule in our lives? Isn't it about time? May we pray?

Jesus, Savior, Sovereign, have mercy on us, sinners all. Christ, Lord, King, rule over our words and deeds, our lives together and our paths alone, and let all other loyalties take second place to you. May we be ruled by your love and may your kingdom come on earth, within us and among us as it is in heaven. Amen.