

Date: November 26, 2006
SUNDAY: Reign of Christ

SERMON: A Kingdom of Truth

Text(s): Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; John 18:33-38

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How many of you have seen the movie *The Queen* with Helen Mirren playing the role of Queen Elizabeth?

Carol and I went to see it this past week, because we've been fans of Helen Mirren ever since we first saw her on public television's "Mystery" series as Inspector Jane Tennyson. If she doesn't get the Oscar for Best Actress for her portrayal of the Queen, then there's no justice in the world.

The scenes from Diana's death and the public grief that followed brought back vivid memories of that fateful event. We were getting out of a taxi in front of our apartment in Paris, coming home from a dinner with friends just around midnight when we heard sirens begin to wail across the river, about a quarter of a mile from where we lived. As we climbed into bed, listening to the sirens, now coming from all directions, we guessed that perhaps there'd been a multiple car pileup on the ring road since it was the weekend most people were coming back to Paris from their summer vacation. Carol said, "Well, we'll probably never know what happened." And with that, we went to sleep. The next morning, being Sunday, I was up early, and just on hunch, turned on the TV to see if there was a report on what all the fuss was about the night before. That's when we learned the news. I announced it at the beginning of our worship service, and there was an audible gasp of shock and moans of grief from the congregation, most of whom hadn't yet heard. Although the movie didn't emphasize it, Diana was as much "the people's princess" in France as she was in her home country. And the monument near where she died quickly became, and still remains, a shrine to her memory where people from all walks of life and all countries and continents come to visit, many of them still leaving flowers

and notes and signs, and even prayers addressed to her.

Seeing those scenes again in the movie reminded me of something we've all observed, but perhaps never really reflected upon deeply: regardless of what form of government people live under, whether a totalitarian, oppressive regime or a parliamentary system, or an often messy democracy like ours, we somehow never lose our fascination with kings and queens—with royalty. The question of whether monarchy is an outdated institution is really a moot question. Virtually every country I know has a monarch, whether or not that sovereign is called a king or queen, as in England or Sweden or *le president de la Republique* as in France or simply The President as in the United States or the head of the Politburo or Chairman of the Party as in some of the formerly or present communist regimes. They may wield great actual power or largely symbolic power. But for better or worse, we do seem to be unable, or at least unwilling, to really get along without them.

I'm not exactly certain why this is so; I've just observed that it is. My hunch is that kings and queens, or whatever other name you want to call them, serve as a visible and tangible focal point of a tribe or nation's identity. They embody something important that we believe or want to believe about ourselves, individually and collectively. They symbolize that which is greater than each of us individually and which grounds our sense of who we are together as a people. They enable us to locate ourselves in relation to the other peoples of the world. Would Great Britain be Great Britain without the monarchy? The movie, at least, suggested that it would not, despite the tensions that emerge when the monarchy is out of touch with its subjects.

I suspect that this is also the reason, why in many religions, including both Judaism and Christianity, God is frequently pictured as a monarch. In Judaism, many, if not most prayers, begin, "Blessed art thou, Lord God, ruler of the universe." Jesus spoke frequently of the *basileia*—the imperial kingdom—of God. And

every Sunday, Christians conclude the Lord's Prayer, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

Today is the final Sunday in the liturgical year. Next Sunday we begin the yearly cycle of worship all over again as we enter the season of Advent. And this final Sunday in the yearly cycle, is the Sunday designated for us to consider what it means to speak of Christ as the sovereign of that divine kingdom. The point of this, of course, is the presumption that in some way this is important to our lives. That's not an obvious point, I'll grant you. Hardly the stuff of lunchtime conversation or bedtime reading, is it? Not high on most of our lists of things to think about or write into our agendas. Even if we've been used to hearing such language in hymns or liturgies in worship, I'd be willing to bet that for most of us, it just sort of rolls over us without having much significance for us.

Which is why I began with the reference to the current movie, *The Queen*. I'd guess that most Brits weren't in the habit of waking up in the morning thinking about the relevance of the monarchy to their daily lives any more than we are. But the crisis of Diana's death brought that topic right to the forefront of people's minds and to the national discourse. Nobody was talking about anything else. Suddenly, their relationship to their sovereign was right there on the table in front of them when they sat down to breakfast. The crisis simply jolted them awake to the significance of the reality they, on most days, simply took for granted without thinking about it.

That was also the case for the audience for whom that strange Old Testament book, Daniel, was written. Israel had long paid lip service to their theology of God as their ultimate ruler. But, like us, it wasn't something that was at the top of most people's daily to-do list of things to think about. But now the people of Judea were in the midst of a full-blown crisis. Antiochus Epiphanes IV the ruler of the Greek empire based in Syria and the titular overlord of

Judea, had suddenly sent his armies into Jerusalem to prevent the Jews from taking sides with his rival Ptolemy down in Egypt.

Antiochus knew that his Judean subjects would never permit any statue or carved image of a human ruler to be set up in Jerusalem and venerated, since they would not even allow an image of their own God to be erected. They claimed God was invisible and too holy to be imagined in human or animal form. So he decided to teach them an object lesson. To show his utter contempt for this invisible king who was no match for his armies, and no rival for his pomp and glory, he erected his image in the Temple and forced the Jewish priests to sacrifice a pig on the altar in the Holy of Holies.

You can imagine the impact this had on the nation. How could God allow such a terrible thing to happen and not strike the tyrant dead with a thunderbolt! Maybe Antiochus was right, maybe their God was not the sovereign ruler of the universe after all. Maybe there was only the might and power of earthly kings like Antiochus. And if that was true, then who were they? Were they a people at all, if they had no sovereign, no monarch except this foreigner who had his feet on their necks?

It was precisely to address those national anxieties and questions that the author of the Book of Daniel wrote, roughly 165 years before the time of Jesus. To do so, he adopted the conventions of a particular literary genre that was well-suited for conveying subversive messages, because it used highly symbolic, coded language, in which events were described in dream visions. He wrote to inspire hope in his fellow Jews when they were losing hope.

After a dream vision in which he saw four great empires rise to power, three of which had already come and gone, his dream vision takes him to heaven, to the realm where God's writ runs, and there he sees what the reality of the situation is from God's perspective. Look at what

is really happening behind the scene of earthly events, he says. Look at who the real ruler of human history and our history is. This fourth empire-builder, Antiochus will go the way of the other three. He isn't the real king; God is still the only real ruler of the universe.

He goes on,

I saw one like a human being, coming with the clouds of heaven. And 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 kingdom one that shall never be destroyed.

That vision of a Coming One, who would be the real ruler, the true king, the Anointed Messiah or deliverer of God's people, caught fire in the imaginations of some people. They saw that it did matter who was their real sovereign. That recognition sparked, among other things, a renewed loyalty to God's law and covenant, even though the Temple was desecrated and partially destroyed. It also fired the revolt against Antiochus led by the Maccabees, and ultimately resulted in the Jews winning their independence, a liberation which is celebrated within Judaism today at *Hanukkah*.

It doesn't stretch our credulity too much to see the history of that successful revolt feeding both the anxieties of Pontius Pilate, the new overlord of Judea some 200 years later, as well as the calm assertion of a man named Jesus who stood in the dock before him, accused by his enemies of attempting to make himself a new King of the Jews.

Taking his cue from the Book of Daniel, when Pilate asks Jesus, "*Are you a king?*" Jesus replies, "*You say that I am a king. But if I am, my kingdom does not derive from any earthly source of power. You don't see any armies fighting to secure my throne, do you? For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs*

to the truth, listens to my voice."

My kingdom is not from this world. I came to bear witness to the truth. That is a sovereign claim, is it not? But what a different kind of sovereignty Jesus discloses. Not the sort that makes its home in a palace in Rome or on a 40,000 acre estate in Scotland, for that matter. Not the sort that imposes its will through legions of soldiers or oppressive and brutal suppression of dissent. Not the sort that controls financial empires that shape the economy and hence the lives of millions of people for better or for worse.

Earthly monarchs come and go. Like great imaginary beasts, they arise and flaunt their power with iron teeth and sharp claws. But eventually, they disappear and another takes their place. They may have the power to shape events, even wreak great destruction, but they have no ultimate power to control human destiny or indeed, the destiny of the whole creation. Only the true ruler can do that. And that ruler's kingdom is a kingdom built upon truth.

That is why remembering that Christ is the real ruler, and how Christ's rule operates is so vitally important to our lives. The universe is founded upon truth. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of truth. Confessing Christ as Lord of that kingdom is to align ourselves with the truth that is the very power that holds the universe in existence.

And yet, that truth only makes its presence known through faithful people, like the author of Daniel, like Jesus, who bear witness to it, not by force of arms, not by divine thunderbolts, but by the integrity and power of their lives, by the example of their self-giving love, by the commitment they make to acting and living out the truth in relationships of justice.

We're the ones, the people of God, who make the sovereign rule of Christ visible in human history. The kingdom of God becomes a reality when a community of people embody it in their lives and relationships. Instead of exploiting

the poor, we care for the poor. Instead of making war, we wage peace. Instead of swallowing the lies of earthly rulers, we follow the words and the example of One in whom we believe we have seen the very incarnation of God's truth, love, and justice.

The poet James Russell Lowell in his poem, "The Present Crisis," written in 1844, protested what he saw as a trumped up war with Mexico under false pretenses. He extracted some of the lines from that longer work and turned them into a hymn, the one that some of us may know as "*Once to every man and nation.*" It's the last stanza of that hymn version that shows how well he understood both the cost and the hope of standing for the truth in a world often ruled by falsehood.

*Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong.
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet the scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above his own.*

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven," we are praying that the God who stands in the shadows keeping watch, will give us the courage, the faith, and the hope, to embody the heavenly kingdom of truth in our own lives, until all the falsehoods in ourselves and in others are exposed, and only God's truth remains.