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November 20, 2022

A Scrappy Little Festival

Despite its self image, *Reign of Christ* Sunday is sort of a fake feast of the church. Of course the major days of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are in a category by themselves. Then there are major days like Epiphany that clearly represent important moments in scripture or All Saints Day, which has spiritual significance to people everywhere for its funerary themes. Reign of Christ is an ambitious little festival, first celebrated less than a century ago by Pope Pius XI and embraced even more recently by Protestant theologians craving some excitement before the ponderous weeks of Advent. They say the liturgical year should end on a high note with a grand celebration of Christ's victory over the powers of sin, evil, and death. Yet it's more commonly known as "Christ the King," among more progressive congregations the day triggers our hermeneutic of suspicion for its connotations of colonialism and global evangelism. Still the festival is hardly recognized by most parishioners, so many preachers will heave and hoe to justify this day as, well, almost as important as the Transfiguration.

It's a vain struggle. The feast isn't found in scripture. It doesn't belong to the Early Church or the Reformations. Most Christian people of color seem to want nothing to do with it. It offends as much as it edifies. It's overshadowed by the American contrivance of Thanksgiving. At United Church of Chapel Hill, we piously observe this holiest of days every year with the Alternative Gift Market. And yet still, while we're straining to recover any significance at all in Reign of Christ Sunday, let's not miss how it's freighted with the most dynamic contradictions of our faith. The Women's Lectionary frame Reign of Christ for us

today not with the prophecy of a warrior Messiah, as most churches will read today from Luke's gospel. Instead, we're reading a passion scene.

There is Jesus - elevated and lifeless.

Gaze at his body - crowned like a king and naked as a criminal.

Prepare the way of the Lord - worshiped as a God and scorned as a heretic. Here he is throned, entitled, and styled, "King of the Jews," in mockery and contempt. In some ways, the theme is similar to the procession of the palms. Here we remember that God's triumph and God's power come to us through the most humble means. Whatever victory is won by Jesus is made by mercy, self-giving, and grace. What the Church has meant to show its conquest, God has used to reveal another path of holding power. Muscle, wealth, beauty - take all of these to the foot of the cross and ask what's come of it?

If the New Testament lesson makes the irony a little too obvious, consider the Hebrew Bible passage, in which Wilda Gafney follows the construction of Solomon's gilded temple with its plunder by the Babylonians. All of Solomon's pride traded away by the next treacherous king. How subtle. On Reign of Christ, we remember not the power of the temple but its destruction. This day of victory begins in loss. If the Pope did mean to offer this festival as a means to spread the Christian faith throughout the world, the image reflected here is not one of cultural conquest but of solidarity with the oppressed. The poor, the hurting, anyone touched with physical or spiritual pain - this image of Jesus on the cross, this promise of Christ's reign resonates because it's you.

Through the lens of women and communities of color, we celebrate this feast of Christ's reign by recalling his exile, his suffering, and his grief. We say, on the far more successful liturgical occasion of Ash Wednesday, we say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." So the final Sunday of the liturgical year strains to be a grand occasion. But I think it's more of a sober sigh accepting

the human condition. Ending the year on a quiet note makes space for us to listen for the herald of the angel - the Good News yet to come, the arrival of God's presence, the real victory that begins with a birth. The liturgical year is now over. It's as finished as our annual gift market. Now we can celebrate a new beginning, next Sunday: the First Sunday of Advent.