



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 7 – Proper 12 (C)

The Reign of Christ

[RCL] Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

When the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde urged President Trump to have mercy at the National Cathedral, she sparked a conversation on the proper relationship between the church and politics. On the one hand, many cheered her biblical call for mercy in public life. What else should one expect from an Episcopal bishop proclaiming the gospel in the National Cathedral? On the other hand, some criticized her for injecting partisan politics into the pulpit. For them, preaching and politics should not mix, at least if the perceived politics are not to their liking.

In our epistle lesson for today, Paul says that Christ is the “head of every ruler and authority.” He goes on to claim that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them.” And in our Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” Jesus is *head of every ruler and authority*. He *disarms and triumphs* over them. He teaches us to pray for the coming of God’s *kingdom*. It all sounds uncomfortably political. Given the fraught conversation about the church and politics today, how might we understand these lessons?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to take a detour into the field of political theology. Political theology is a recent development. It emerged in Germany in the 1960s. But it has a long history. Its roots are found in the Old and New Testaments, in St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. As church leaders struggle to find a faithful witness in these trying times, political theology may help.

Elizabeth Phillips, in her book *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, distinguishes between a first and a second generation of political theologians. The first generation are critical friends of modernity. For them, the modern nation-state and civil society are given, either as neutral realms or as positive moments in the history of freedom. However, first-generation political theologians also challenged the privatization of religion that came with modernity. For them, Christianity was public and political instead of merely private and spiritual. And because they saw the nation-state as the center of politics, they viewed the political task of the church as the reform and revitalization of state institutions. The church transforms society by heralding God’s future kingdom of justice, freedom, and peace.

For example, Jurgen Moltmann's theology of hope (also the name of his 1964 book on the topic) calls on the church to live in witness to the promises of God who can and will make all things right, promises made in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though the present world is out of alignment with God's future, Christians should not flee the world. Rather, living in the hope of the resurrection, the church calls all people and nations to the new future that God promises. The political task of the church, according to the first-generation of political theologians, is to offer criticism and advice to the modern state in an effort to direct it to the future kingdom announced in the gospel.

The second generation of political theologians inherited much from the first generation and also sought to overturn a great deal. Like the first generation, they stressed the public and political nature of Christian faith. However, they decisively shifted the locus of the political. The first generation saw the nation-state as the center of politics. In contrast, the second generation saw the church as the center of politics. The church is the true body politic, and the nation-state is a pale imitation or worse. Instead of trying to shore up state and society, the church provides an alternative kind of politics. Instead of politics founded on the war of all against all, the church offers a vision based on an original peace. Instead of politics based on the threat of violence to keep order, the church offers a vision of politics based on reconciliation. Instead of politics based on individualism and consumption, the church offers a vision of politics based on common goods and care. In the politics of the church, Christ is king, the Sermon on the Mount is our founding document, and our final destiny is the reconciliation of all people to one another and to God through Christ. As Stanley Hauerwas says, the primary social task of the church is *to be* the church. In doing so, the church bears witness to the reality of the kingdom of God as an alternative kind of politics. For second-generation theologians, the political task is not to offer advice to the nation-state, but to show the world there is a better way in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we have seen, Paul says in Colossians that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them.” Rulers and authorities are enigmatic figures. And not every scholar agrees about who or what Paul means by them. However, there is a general consensus that rulers and authorities are spiritual and cosmic powers that exercise control over aspects of the world. They are both personal, such as angels or demons, and impersonal, such as systems, ideologies, and institutions. They were created good (by and for Christ), but they have fallen and are in revolt. Indeed, as Paul says elsewhere (1 Cor 2:8), they “crucified the Lord of glory.” And yet, as Paul says in our passage, it is precisely through the cross that Christ triumphs over them. Jesus defeats and disarms the rulers and authorities, not through earthly power and violence, but through cross and resurrection. Therefore, the rulers and authorities are subordinate to Christ, who has created them, disarmed them, and reigns supreme over them. Christ reigns not just over personal souls, but over every realm of power—spiritual, political, cultural, and systemic.

In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” In this petition, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for a new exodus, for the release of captive Israel. Jesus is not calling for the reform of government and society in the Roman Empire but

for the deliverance of God's people from bondage. To pray for the coming of God's kingdom is to pray for the defeat of evil and the establishment of God's rule. In Luke's gospel, the coming of God's kingdom means good news for the poor, release for the captive, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). And it will be inaugurated not through earthly power and violence, but through the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In Luke, Jesus is turning worldly power upside down. As Mary sings about the God of Israel, "he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (1:52). To pray for the coming reign of this God is to pray for the overcoming of an old order ruled by sin and violence by a new order dependent on God's justice and peace.

If we step back and think about our epistle and gospel lessons in terms of the first and second generations of political theology, then we would have to say that today's lessons are more consistent with the second generation. Jesus came proclaiming a kingdom that turned the world upside down. He taught his disciples to pray for this kingdom. He inaugurated it through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. And, as Paul tells us, Jesus defeated and disarmed the rulers and authorities of the world through his cross and resurrection. The politics in these passages are not about the reformation and revitalization of the Roman Empire. They are about the establishment of the new order of God's justice and peace and the formation of a church that lives out the politics of a people who proclaim Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

If we return to the fraught relationship between the church and politics, The Episcopal Church faces the challenge of discerning the nature of today's rulers and authorities, at whatever level or location they might be found. Are they like the rulers and authorities who nailed Jesus to the cross? If so, then the second generation's vision of the politics of the church as a radical alternative to the politics of the nation-state may make more sense. Or are the rulers and authorities of today very different from those whom Jesus defeated and disarmed? Are they generally benign and mostly in need of some constructive criticism? If so, then the first generation's vision of political theology as offering friendly advice based on a vision of God's future reign may make more sense. The important choice facing The Episcopal Church today is not really between being political or not political. Rather, the important question is how the church will address politics, like the first or second generation of political theologians.

The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano is co-editor of *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship and Saving Words: 20 Redemptive Words Worth Rescuing*.