

**“Don’t Lose Your Head”**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23**  
**Mike Magee - 11/23/08**  
**Brentwood First Presbyterian**  
**The Reign of Christ Sunday**

I want to give you a little back ground on Ephesians. There is a debate about to whom it was written, and about who is the author. Its sister letter, Colossians, written by the same author because of style, vocabulary, and theology, was so popular, scholars believe, that it was rewritten and refined and a blank put at the top of the letter so it could circulate to many churches, changing the name at the top. It just so happens, scholars think, that the copy that survived had Ephesus in the blank.

Some feel that because the theology is more refined and developed, that a different person wrote this letter than wrote the earlier letters of Paul. But that does not allow for people to grow and to change. Even world famous theologians like Paul can grow. What are the odds that we would know of Paul, the best educated, most prolific, and well traveled theologian of the first century, and not know the name of someone who writes better than Paul, whose theology all the scholars think is more mature than Paul’s? Isn’t it more likely that the letter to the Ephesians and the Colossians is written by a more mature Paul than by an unknown person who is a better theologian, with Paul’s name attached?

The Letter to the Ephesians is called by some scholars the Queen of the Letters of the NT. They feel it is the highest reach of NT thought. Today's reading from Ephesians tells us about kingship. And scholars say more than any other book of the Bible, it tells us what it means to be a church.

**We are confused about the kingship of Christ**

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, the season of expectation of the birth of Jesus. This last Sunday has been called Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday.

The New Testament is full of the analogy of kings and kingdoms and yet, that isn’t very relevant to us in the United States who has never known anything except a congress and an elected president.

Henry VIII was on the throne of England when Luther was reforming the church in Germany. Henry had six wives. His first one was Catherine, who gave him four children in a row who were either born dead or died shortly after birth. Her fifth child did survive but it was frail - and it was a girl. Her sixth was stillborn. Henry wanted a son to succeed him on the throne. It was obvious to him he needed a new wife, but the Pope wouldn’t grant him a divorce, so King Henry VIII simply said, "From now on I’m the head of the

Church of England," and he gave himself the right to divorce Queen Catherine. Some of his other wives weren't that lucky. He severed his marriages with them by severing their heads from their bodies on the chopping block. Nor were Henry's mates the only ones to get the axe.

Just a few years ago in the Central African Republic, the ruler, Bokassa, crowned himself as emperor. Time magazine commented: "It was an extravaganza that few of the 3,500 guests from 43 nations would ever forget - or forgive." Bokassa's throne was shaped in the form of a giant eagle with a wingspan of 13½ feet. Its 800 feathers were covered with gold. His coronation robe was of ermine and velvet and had a train 39 feet long and was decorated with 785,000 pearls. It cost \$175,000. His crown, his scepter, and his wife's tiara came to five million dollars. For the feast, he had 240 tons of food flown in. He had his guests hauled around in sixty new Mercedes Benz. It took \$5,000 apiece to fly them into the Central African Republic. All in all, the coronation cost \$20 million in a country whose gross annual product is only \$250 million.

Domination, violence, and economic exploitation are, some would say, necessary weapons of maintaining power. But Jesus' power comes from a different source. Pontius Pilate talks about truth during the passion of Christ. And truth threatens power.

In the town Smyrna mentioned by John in the Book of Revelation, is a church, St. Polycarp's church. In 156 A.D, a religious leader named Polycarp was put to death in Smyrna, and the small struggling Christian community was terrified by the persecution under the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus, and was heartbroken by its leader's death. The historian who wrote the record of it, however, for the centuries to read, boiled down a great truth into a few words when he dated the event. 'Statius Quadratus, proconsul, now' he wrote, 'Jesus Christ, King forever.' " I wonder if that historian guessed that in the Twentieth Century we should be reading that. Who was "Statius Quadratus, proconsul?" But still above the world's turmoil, the affirmation resounds, "Jesus Christ, King forever."

Yes, Christ's kingship is not like the world's kings.

### **The kingship of Christ is humility**

Christ is indeed king, but like the fabled ruler, he walks through the streets in beggar's clothing. Christ's presence in the world is encountered not with flamboyant demonstrations of power, but amid the needy and the marginalized. Christ is recognized among the "least of these." Who is accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

God came to us as a baby in a feeding tray for animals. Jesus then walked among those his culture rejected, even people who denied being his friend. Finally, he suffered and died on a cross between two thieves, the object of derision.

Jesus did not come to us as a warrior, but in humility and weakness. Born in humility, Jesus came to rule over all with love, tumbling down the walls of hostility which divide us. Helpless as an infant, Jesus showed the power of God's love. Poor in things of the world, Jesus brought the wealth of God's grace. Rejected by many, Jesus welcomed all who sought him. Jesus' resurrection by God shows humankind that no one is beyond the power of God's reconciliation.

### **The kingship of Christ is servanthood**

We aren't asked to do the grand, dramatic thing, but rather the little everyday help. A cup of water, or something to eat, some clothing, visitation of the ill, going to see someone in prison - these are the deeds that count in the kingdom of Christ. Jesus wants us to know that the little spontaneous, loving gestures are the ones that are significant. We so often make the mistake of thinking in terms of gifts of a thousand dollars or large endowments or the spectacular work or contribution: Those surely help in the kingdom, but we must always look for the opportunity to respond to the simple, human help of the people we meet each day. The two things that characterize the true church are love for Christ and love for other people. What is called the double love of the Gospels.

Therese of Avila tells us 500 years ago that the church is the hands to do Christ's work, the feet to run his errands, and a mouth to speak for him. Paul tells us in the letter ascribed to the Ephesians that the church is the very body of Christ. With Jesus at its head.

You have heard me tell the story of the church that fights and squabbles about everything. But between October and March each year they bring the Room in the Inn program to their church. They serve as inn keepers for homeless men, who they feed and give a warm place to bath and sleep, one night a week. From October to March, they focus on reaching outside themselves and help other people. They put Jesus as their head, squarely in the center between their shoulders, and they have peace and unity.

### **The kingship of Christ is reconciliation and unity**

We say Jesus Christ is our king. But is he really. Who or what is sitting in the thrones of our hearts. What about ourselves, our ideology, our addictions, our jobs, and our children. Can these be our kings?

When we put our **ideology** on the thrones of our hearts, we break the harmony between each other, Democrat and Republican, Christian and Muslim, and so on and so on. By putting **ourselves** on the thrones of our hearts, we break the harmony between us and the natural world, melting polar caps, warming seas, and pollution, all

because we want to sit in our cars all by ourselves instead of carpooling or riding mass transit. What is true of our outer world is also true of our inner world. Each of us is a walking civil war, torn between our desire for good and the **desire for evil**. We hate our sins and love them at the same time. We are addicted to doing the things we know are not good for ourselves and other people. We are internally broken. When we put our **jobs or our children** on the thrones of our hearts, we do not take out time for worship and prayer and Bible study. Because we are too busy with work and family, we drive a wedge between us and our relationship with God. In a world without Christ, there is nothing but disunity.

Apostle Paul believes that it is not hellfire from which Christ saves us, but from our sins. For the mature Paul, the one who wrote the letter ascribed to the Ephesians, salvation is the same as reconciliation. To be saved is to be reconciled. To have one's sins removed one must be forgiven and reconciled. To be saved is to be reconciled with each other, with the natural world, with ourselves, and with God. Paul tells us that salvation is reconciliation and unity. And this unity can never be found until we put Christ on the throne, as our head.

Christ is God's instrument of reconciliation. But the church is Christ's instrument of reconciliation. In bringing Christ into the world, the church breaks down all the middle walls of separation. The church stands for the purpose of universal reconciliation.

Some think Abraham Lincoln was the best president our country has ever had. And his claim to fame was the emphasis he put on unity and reconciliation. George Washington was good because he was humble. Thomas Jefferson was good because he was smart. Theodore Roosevelt was good because he was courageous. But Lincoln's claim to fame was unity and reconciliation. He purposely chose people who disagreed with him to be on his team, because he knew that a composite decision is better if his team is robust, than if his team is made up of "yes" men. And you cannot put people who have different opinions in the same room and not have forgiveness.

How hard is it to say, "I am sorry," when you discover or suspect you have hurt someone?

How hard is it to say, "No worries?" Or, "It's all okay?" Or, "Grace abounds!"

The exaltation of Christ is not an end in itself. The task of Christ, and Christ's church, is one of reconciliation. And Ephesians tells us we are saved together, that is reconciled together, or not at all. For salvation consists of breaking down barriers and celebrating a new common humanity in Christ, as one body of Christ.

**The church is the hope giving body of Christ**

A friend of mine and Debbie's, Dr Eddie Reddick, perfected a new way to remove gall bladders on pigs. Then he did the same technique on human beings. He used laser assisted laparoscopy, and changed the way surgery was done forever. Hospitalizations were shortened to day surgery, and people went back to work 7 days later instead of 4 weeks later. Now everything is done laparoscopically. But he could not teach everyone how to do it. He taught some surgeons, who taught some others, who taught some others. It all started in his private practice, and eventually spread to medical schools all over the world. One individual developed a new way to do surgery, but he could not do it on everyone in the world who needed it. So he taught other people to relieve the suffering of the millions who needed surgery. That is what the church is to Jesus. It is the way, truth, and life of the NT that all people and all nations can become one. But unity cannot happen until the whole world knows the way, the truth, and the life described in Jesus. And it is the task of the church to bring that about.

Christ is the head, the word "head" being the metaphor for leader or ruler. But "head" is also a metaphor for source or origin. God is the head of Christ, and Christ is the head of the church. The church is the body. But Christ is more than just a member of the body. Christ is the head. The church is literally the hands to do Christ's work, the feet to run his errands, and a voice to speak his words. God is counting on us. You see, the church, like Jesus, gives people hope. The church, with Christ at its head, is in the business of hope. The church is the hope giving body of Christ.

One of my patients is from rural Tennessee. In rural Tennessee, they conflate the words "help" and "hope." Her husband asks me if I am going to "hope" his wife. The medical profession and churches are alike in this. Both are in the business of "hoping" people.

### **Conclusion**

One Sunday in the city of Florence, 450 years ago, a famous preacher was preaching to a great multitude. Suddenly, in the middle of his discourse he cried aloud: "It is the Lord's will to give a new head to this city of Florence." For a moment he paused, keeping the people in suspense, and then he went on: "The new head is Christ! Christ seeks to become your King." And with that the whole multitude was on their feet, shouting: "Long live Jesus, King of Florence!"

Today, on the reign of Christ Sunday, on the last day of the Christian year, in the year 2008, we proclaim the same thing: "Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior." I am going to ask you to stand right now, and repeat after me. Let me hear you say it, ...