

Christus Rex/Christa Regina

Pastor Cynthia Lapp

November 25, 2012, Christ the King Sunday

Psalm 93

John 18:33-37

Revelation 1:4b-8

It was a time of tumult in the western world. Fascism was taking hold; nationalism and secularism were on the rise. People were losing faith in Christ and by extension his church. Pope Pius XI had to do something to reinforce to the church and the world that “Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills and bodies.” He had to find a way to emphasize that true power rests not in the various leaders of the world who hope to gather power and might to themselves. It is Christ who is king.

In 1925 the Pope spoke through the encyclical *Quas Primas* designating the Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. This is now celebrated the last Sunday in the liturgical year, the Sunday before advent when we begin waiting for this king of the cosmos.

Of course, the idea of Christ as king didn’t just spring from the imagination of the Pope and his advisors. Psalm 93, that we read this morning, describes God as king, and the passage from Revelation refers to Jesus Christ as ruler of all the kings of the earth.

The passage from John shows us how the local ruler, Pontius Pilate tries to understand the man Jesus who some people called king, though Jesus does not claim the title himself. Earlier in John’s gospel, after Jesus feeds 5,000 people, he runs away

because in their enthusiasm the people are ready to crown him king, right then and there. He will have none of it.

Almost 90 years later the world is still in tumult, only the names and locations have changed. The church still needs to be reminded where our true allegiance lies.

As Anabaptists we tend to focus on the man Jesus, the practical ways that we can follow in his footsteps. We follow the Jesus way; we emphasize his words, his life and teachings. We claim that our trust is not in the leaders of the world who make grand—recent election, for all our good intentions, we can still get swept up in national and international politics.

Perhaps it our sincere attempt to live like Jesus that can lead to misunderstanding what this Sunday reveals: It is not that Jesus is king, it is Christ that is king. This Sunday is not Jesus the king Sunday; it is Christus Rex, Christ the King Sunday.

Several years ago, Tony Brun preached a sermon in which he talked about the difference between the particularities and universalities of faith. For Christians, Jesus is the particular person who lived and died, but Christ is the universal. At Easter we say Christ is risen. It is Christ that reigns over the world, Christ reigns in the heavens. How can we begin to understand the difference between the particular and the universal? The reign of Jesus, the reign of Christ?

I suppose it is what I perceive to be the patriarchal nature of this Sunday that has caused me to avoid preaching about it for so long. The Pope declares Christ the King because the male led church senses it is losing its power. In this system, the cure for a loss of power is to be more explicit about the male godhead who rules over the church.

And not just the church in this world but, the cosmos. However, today I will try not to rail against the patriarchy so much as wrestle with some feminist understandings of Christ.

In 1984, artist Edwina Sandys, granddaughter of Sir Winston Churchill, exhibited her bronze sculpture of a crucifixion at St. John the Divine in New York City. While this sculpture had been on exhibit in London nine years earlier, it wasn't until it was unveiled during Lent in the cathedral that it became the center of controversy. It had to be removed after only 11 days. Edwina Sandys' sculpture depicts a nude woman, wearing a crown, on a cross. It is entitled "Christa."

Rev. James Parks Morton, from St. John the Divine cathedral, described the purpose of the sculpture this way: *Christa simply reminded viewers that women as well as men are called upon to share the suffering of Christ.* (edwinasandys.com)

While I appreciate the egalitarian nature of Rev. Morton's interpretation, his was not the only response to the Christa. Some of the faithful saw this naked woman on a cross as pornographic and sacrilegious. There simply could be no connection between this 4-foot tall nude woman and Christ. (Why a naked man on a cross has not been seen as pornographic for the past 1,000 years is a whole other question.)

For those in the Christian tradition that lean heavily toward the death of Christ as salvific, (in other words, the death of Jesus grants salvation and brings new life,) the image of a woman on the cross is unnerving and frightening. The foundation, perhaps the hero, upon which their faith is built must shift with this image. What could it possibly mean if the Christ figure is a woman? What would it mean for salvation to come from and through the body of a woman, not just a man?

Christa opens the door to understanding the universality of Christ in a whole host of new ways. If Christ can be Christa, then what if Christ can also be African or Native or gay or developmentally disabled or have AIDS? Christa reveals the fact that much of the church has always had the particular — Jesus — on the cross, not Christ the universal.

Even some feminists criticized “Christa.” They worried that Christa masks and trivializes the suffering that many women endure daily. It is not only that women are “called to share the suffering of Christ” as Rev. Morton says. The church uses the suffering of Christ (and now Christa) as a way to call people with little power to endure suffering because Christ suffered. Does Christa elevate and endorse the suffering of women?

As Anabaptists we might raise yet another set of questions. Is it the suffering and death of Jesus Christ that we are called to emulate? Or is it the life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ that points the way to new life and salvation? How does our life together reflect the life and ministry of Jesus Christ?

In this way, perhaps Anabaptists begin to move toward what feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock describes as the “Christa community.” She points not to the death of Jesus as salvific but to the community — the community that surrounded him in his ministry and continues on after his crucifixion. It is this Christa community that rescues and saves. It is not the act of one man dying that saves but the ongoing life of Jesus Christ in the Christa community. (Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal, Kathryn Greene-McCreight, p. 85)

While this may sound counter to what we hear preached in many churches, we also have the familiar words of the 16th Century saint, Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.”

Is this the Christa community? Followers of Christ/a being the hands and feet of Christa/Christ in the world?

Last week was the 10th anniversary of my ordination to the ministry. My experience as a particular woman, with other particular women, is part of what led me to accept my call to ministry. And my experience with the particular gave me a surprising desire to minister with, and to, women and men, adults and children, people I know and people I do not know. The particular led to something larger than myself and my Jesus. I was drawn to, or perhaps by, Christa, the universal.

During seminary, I had visited an art exhibit of over 20 different portrayals of Christa, in various artistic media. As I prepared for the ordination, I was quite clear that I wanted Christa to be part of the celebration. Even though Anabaptists have a strong martyr tradition and history, I was not so much interested in the suffering Christ/Christa on the cross, but the living Christa/Christ. I asked a member of the congregation, Melanie Yoder Salim, to create a banner of the risen Christa.

When I first saw this Christa I was overcome, perhaps as people were when viewing Edwina Sandys' Christa. She was so big and beautiful, so bold and powerful. (Her colors were more vivid 10 years ago.)

Looking back, I suppose I had some naïve idea that the ordination was about me, my journey, my calling. Perhaps what overwhelmed me was how Christa points to something much bigger, to the journey we are all called to take, to the ministry that is available to all of us, to the universal.

This risen Christa, at the alter table, holds in her womb, the body and blood, the broken bread and the cup of wine. She feeds us with her body.

Christa stands in a basin of water, the waters of our physical birth and the new birth through baptism.

The basin with the pitcher, reminds us of the servanthood and reconciliation which Jesus lived and to which Christa calls us.

Above and around Christa's crowned head is the wind and fire of the Spirit — that power that energizes and enlivens the Christa Community.

Her hand raised in blessing invites us to live into the healing work which is now ours.

What might it mean for us as followers of the particular, Jesus, to become disciples of the universal, Christa/Christ? Does it make any difference in how we understand and live out our faith or is it all a matter of semantics and theological labels?

Today on this Christ the King Sunday, or perhaps Christa Regina, Christa the Queen Sunday, we are reminded that whether we respect and appreciate the government or are suspicious and distrust the government, our truest allegiance is not to those who rule on this earth. Whether we hold those in power in high esteem or with apprehension, our highest commitment is not to those who cling to power but to Christ,

to the Christa community, where we experience the living, dying and risen Christa/Christ week in and week out.

May the mystery of the universal Christa/Christ continue to unfold in each of us and in our life together as her people.