

Christ the King's Reverse Kingship: A Curtain-raiser to the Story of Christmas

Reflecting on Matthew 25:31-46

It is again that time of year, when people are getting ready for Christmas by putting up Christmas trees and lights in this bleak winter, hoping against hope this Christmas is going to bring cheer and happiness amidst the pandemic and the lockdowns. Whilst the Government is discussing the possibilities of families meeting for Christmas following the guidelines of medical experts, there are different Christmas adverts taking over the social media, preparing people into the festive Christmas spirit. As churches we have been discussing about the plans for Christmas, thinking about carols, Advent study, Christmas day services etc. All of these can be summed up in this saying, "this Christmas might not be the same, but the story remains the same," for it brings us to understand that the real reason for Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ, who was born to offer hope and peace to a world of hopelessness and peacelessness. I know some of you might be thinking is this not too early to talk about Christmas in November.

The Sunday, before the season of Advent, which is the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar is observed as "Christ the King" Sunday, where churches across the nations seek the relevance of Christ the king in the journey of faith. The text from the lectionary for this Sunday is from Matt 25:31-46, which is about the Son of Man as the king judging the nations. I recognise this text serves as the curtain-raiser to the story of Christmas, where God in Jesus was born as a baby, pitching God's tent among the creation, particularly with those on the margins to identify with and to be with the creation. This text provides some pointers in understanding Christ the king as a king offering alternative and even reverse kingship, radically very different from the then Roman emperors and even today's political kings and kingmakers. This text is the last speech of Jesus Christ before his passion, where he shares about sheep and goats, and ultimately he becomes the scapegoat of the empire, for preaching about the kingdom of God as against the kingdom of Rome. Allow me to share three significant pointers in understanding Christ the king's reverse kingship from this given text.

1. Christ the king reverses kingship by serving as a shepherd:

The role of a king is to exercise power and authority over people, and history speaks voluminously of how kings have (mis)used power, (ab)used their thrones and have upheld hierarchy in their positions. Christ the king, on the other hand reverses his kingship by not engaging in ceremonial celebrations of pomp, rather serves as a shepherd, being on the ground, working with the sheep and the goats, dirtying his hands and feet. Christ the king is a king who has a deep love for his people, and wants to identify with the common people, and chose to be a shepherd, a common job in that agrarian pastoral society. Christ the king could command any job to be done just by an order, live a life comfortably in the citadels of palaces, yet he chose to get down and do the job of a shepherd by himself, only to express his care for his people. Christ the king, "did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death (became a scapegoat), even death on a cross." (Philippians 2: 6-8). Christ the king reverses his kingship and serves as a shepherd not only in solidarity with his community but also as a critique against the power authority of kingships.

2. Christ the king reverses kingship by offering God's kingdom as a free inheritance:

In the early first century Palestine, who were living under the occupation of the Roman empire, kingship was based on the family succession to the throne. It was more of a patriarchal dynasty rule, where the son inherits the throne after the father's rule and it continued for generations. Kingship had always been a family inheritance, and the kingdom belonged to the kings as part of the inheritance. In contrast to this norm of kingship and kingdom as a dynasty rule, Christ the king reverses kingship by offering the kingdom of God to people of his choice. The people who have addressed the needs of the 'others,' who have been quenching thirst and feeding the hungry with food and justice suddenly became the inheritors of Christ's kingdom. In verse 34, Christ the king invites all those who served the weak and the vulnerable and offers, "come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Christ the king offers his kingdom of God based on God's grace to people who challenged the structures and offered hope by sharing food, water, clothing, shelter and care. It is important to recognise that it is God's grace that chooses people to inherit the kingdom of God, because it is God's grace that helps them to serve the vulnerable in the society and no one can serve the 'other' by their own strength and merit. When they were offered this kingdom, the recipients were surprised, asking "Lord when was it that we gave you water..." for they were chosen to inherit the kingdom of God purely by the grace of God. It is the grace of God that leads people to serve the weak and the poor, and it is not the other way because one serves the weak and poor that they become the recipients of the grace of God. In offering his kingdom as an inheritance to people demonstrating love in action, Christ the king did not follow the book of rules and commandments, and offered it as a surprise package to those who did not even think of inheriting it. Christ the king is a God of surprises, for he surprised all the nations by defying the norms and rules and followed the principle of grace of God that lead to love in action.

3. Christ the king reverses kingship by choosing the vulnerable as his family members:

When Meghan Markle married Prince Harry, there were several racist comments made against Meghan that she was "polluting" the royal family with her African American biracial identity. Less than two years after their wedding this royal couple quit as fulltime royals, for they were driven by toxic coverage in the media, which often veered into racial harassment and bullying. For some people an "outsider" joining the royal family was a matter of disgrace and couldn't take that as 'normal.' Christ the king in this text, surprised everyone not only by offering his kingdom as an inheritance to people outside of his kingship, but the greater surprise came when he said to those surprised inheritors, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (v40) Christ the king reverses his kingship by choosing 'the vulnerable,' 'the least in the society,' 'the outsiders' as his family members, as his brothers and sisters, and said anything done to such people is done unto him. There was every possibility for Christ the king to choose many other good kings in the history, the rich people, the powerful ones, the prosperous people to be his family members, for it would suit a king to make relationships with other kingly families. But reversing such norms, Christ the king chooses people who are hungry, people who are thirsty, people who are poor, people who are sick, people who are foreigners & strangers, and people who are in prison, who are those supposedly the 'invalids' in the society as his family members. It takes a great courage and guts to choose such vulnerable people as valuable people, and even unto making them a family, and it takes only Christ the king to do such a radical reversal from the norm of power.

The message that Christ the king offers is, all matters in this life is that, it is only love that thrives. Love for the 'other' particularly the 'outsiders', the 'powerless' and the 'vulnerable' is the yardstick to demonstrate the grace of God in each of our lives and communities. There are many inferences that can be drawn from this text as a relevance for us today. Allow me to share three particular points of relevance for us as a Church: Firstly, how much of our church's mission mandate matches with this text, where love for the 'other' in actions thrives? As churches we have been busy trying to keep up the status quo of our churches memberships and have been engrossed in putting our energies for the survival of the church and its properties. Feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring the sick and visiting the imprisoned, these hexagonal representative acts of love in action to the vulnerable people, should be the mission mandate of our churches. When our mission engagements are in such a direction, we are truly serving Christ the king, who has come to reverse the norms of kingship. Church is all about serving in love the community, outside the walls of our church building, particularly the vulnerable people.

Secondly, the calling for us as a church is to align with Christ the king who reverses his kingship, for he chose not to be with the powers but consciously chose the powerless as his family members. In that alignment with Christ, we are called to give up our pride, privilege, positions, and power and seek to identify with the weak and the vulnerable in our communities. On how many occasions did we not exhibit our superiority and supremacy as a church? The call is clear and loud, to give up our privilege and supremacy. It is time that we relocate our churches to the margins of the society from the centres of powers, for among such people does Christ reside pitching his tent. As a church if we want to encounter Christ today, it is pitching our tents with Jesus on such sites of margins and vulnerability.

Thirdly, in this text all we see Christ the king distinguishes is, those that demonstrate love in action to the 'outsiders' and those who don't demonstrate love in action to the 'outsiders.' The calling from this text for us is to move from not demonstrating love in action to demonstrating love in action, for Christ the king is a God of love and justice, and would not want anyone to be lost. This text serves as a challenge and an encouragement in that direction to submit ourselves to the grace of God who receives any one and everyone into her fold. Rather than titling this text as 'judgement of the nations' as it is titled in most versions of the Bible, for me there are two titles that I want to give to this given text. The first title I choose to label this text is "Christ the king's reverse kingship from power to love," and second title I label is "Love alone thrives, for love to the 'outsider' is all that matters." This text, thus serves as a curtain-raiser to the story of Christmas, where God in Jesus Christ reverses the kingship and is pitching his tent with the margins by being born as a baby in Bethlehem. For God in order to demonstrate God's love in action to this world comes down as a child born of mother Mary, identifying with the weak and the vulnerable and the 'outsiders.' The whole story of Christmas is a celebration of the reverse kingship of God, for God did not come as a massive giant disciplining the world with a cane in his hand, nor God did not come to be born as a rich guy enjoying all the privileges and comforts of life, rather God came down as a baby, born in a manger, in the context of Roman empire, to give life and life in all its fullness to the entire creation. Therefore this text from Matthew 25:31-46 serves as a perfect curtain-raiser to the story of Christmas, and if at all I want to do a Biblical advert for Christmas, I would choose this

text as my plot and convey that “love alone thrives, for God in Jesus was born for love, offering love as a way forward for any life situation.”

As we enter into a new Church liturgical calendar from next week, as we begin the season of Advent, let me pray and wish you all a meaningful season. Let us strive in keeping Christ the reason for this season, and if Christ is the reason, then his family members, the vulnerable, the weak, the powerless and the ‘outsiders’ should be at the heart of our mission and ministry of love. May God’s grace go with each of us so that we can serve the community God has placed us in. Amen.

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