

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Proper 29, Year C, November 24, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Participating in God's Realm"
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

God: empty us of all distractions and fill us instead with your grace.

you may be aware that today is recognized by some Christians as Christ the King Sunday; technically it is only so to Roman Catholics and Lutherans, and there is no reference to it in our *Book of Common Prayer*; yet we share the Revised Common Lectionary with these and other churches, and you see that our epistle and gospel passages do refer to Christ's kingdom

though there are many references to God's and Christ's kingdom in the Bible, there are dangers in using this term 'kingdom;' historically, many have become kings for dubious reasons and have served in less than enlightened ways; our nation was founded by leaving a kingdom and severing ties from its king; those kingdoms that are still around today are often marked by 'royal family' shenanigans or by repressive rule; kingdoms are big in the world of fantasy, such as the Magic Kingdom; Elvis is "the King," and the notions that "Elvis lives," and his home being called "Graceland" seem too close for comfort to religious belief; and many non-churched people see Christianity as partaking of many of these negative 'kingdom' characteristics

as Christians we need to be careful about separating the word from its aura of negative theological connotations; no one gets to choose their king, yet we choose our allegiance to Christ; in a kingdom few subjects are allowed to be in any direct relationship with their king; the king is someone seen only from afar, and is served via a rigid hierarchy; yet we have do have direct access to Christ; all of these present a distortion of Christianity and of our relationship with God, with Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit

in order to stress that God's influence extends without being limited to particular lands, territories, or peoples, in a way that could be marked on a map, some have suggested that the word 'kindom' be used as a substitute for 'kingdom;' while recognizing that God holds the ultimate power over all of creation, it reminds us that in human lives God never works by force; God exercises power in and through us, and most effectively through the Christian

kinship relationships that we form working together, as the Church (with a capital c)

another alternative word I find helpful is that of God's 'realm;' realm seems less anchored by physical characteristics and emphasizes that God's work often goes unseen; it is something that happens within the hearts, and minds, and bodies, and souls of faithful people, often outside the physical trappings of religious buildings, organizations, and programs; recall that in Luke (17:21) Jesus himself says "the kingdom of God is within you;" but that 'you' is plural, so a better translation may be "the kingdom of God is among you"

I'm reminded of the Harry Potter books and films which portray a whole world which is parallel to the one we live in, and yet unseen; Harry Potter knows nothing of it until he is told that he is a wizard and begins to learn about this other world; it is a strange world populated by wizards, good and evil, who have special powers; there are things from that other world that only wizards can see, like hidden train platforms, entire city streets, and a school campus in an old castle; the good wizards spend their time battling evil; and in these stories, in the end, it is love that wins out over everything

God's realm is a lot like that; it exists fully within this everyday world of ours, yet you can't necessarily see it; many people don't know much about this realm; we only know about it because we have been told about it and initiated into it through our baptism; it is when we fully grasp the importance of our baptism and, yes, the otherworldly power that we were given at that moment by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us, that we recognize the true role that we are to play in God's realm within this everyday world; we keep being instructed about it as we study the Bible; and through our prayers, our participation in church, and from the witness of other Christians, we learn to see it more clearly and to take part in this realm; sometimes it does involve us in the battle of good against evil; and we know that God's love will win out, in the end, over everything

so, we live in a different world, somewhat, in a different realm, than those who do not know God; we live among them on the same streets, shop in the same stores, watch the same TV shows, and access the same internet; but we have, as members of this realm, a different set of hopes, assurances, and promises—we know about God's love; our job is not to live apart in some separate realm, away from this world, but to engage ourselves enough in the

everyday world that we can be witnesses to it about this other unseen world; to share the hopes, assurances, and promises—and most of all, to share that knowledge about God’s love; our job is to bring the whole world into relationship with God—to bring the whole world into God’s realm

that is what Colossians is talking about when it says that we have been enabled “to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light;” elsewhere this is referred to as a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) of which we are an important part; that’s what Colossians means in identifying Jesus as the head of the body to which we belong, the Church (again with a capital c); and notice how the gospel shows a shift in understanding; the inscription placed over Jesus’ head names him “the King of the Jews;” but even the criminal who derides him rightly recognizes Jesus as much more than that, as the Messiah, the one whose realm encompasses both earth and heaven, the one whose realm is before time, and is now, and will be for ever

Christ’s coming to earth among us, and inviting us to continue his ministries, transfers a new responsibility to us; we are to seek out those people who are not fully aware of God’s realm, who are not fully aware of their invitation to participate in it, who are not fully aware of the wonderful potential consequences of their participation in it—of receiving and sharing God’s love

like those invisible trains and flying cars in Harry Potter, what we can’t see with our everyday eyes is the person of Christ in our midst; but as Christians instructed into the workings of God’s realm, we can learn to see better with the eyes of our faith, to see Christ’s invisible presence and works everywhere around us

yes, we live in God’s realm, but it is not a private realm just for us; it is not a realm of privilege for us; it is a realm that calls us to love, and to service, and to witness; remember that God’s realm is love; remember that God’s realm is here and everywhere; remember how we are called to participate, fully, in God’s realm