

Sermon  
17 Pentecost—Proper 21-A-2  
St Andrew's, Methuen  
September 27, 2020  
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Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32  
Psalm 25:1-8  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

Back in the early 1980s, when I was the associate rector of Saint Paul's Church in Augusta, Georgia, my family and I were at church on a Sunday morning and someone broke into our house. I cannot now remember what they took, certainly we didn't have much of value, but I clearly remember my feelings about this event: I was angry and distressed, and I felt violated. Some unknown person violated the sanctity of my home!

Well, it was also on a Sunday that a poor Jew from the hill country, went into the Temple in Jerusalem and started throwing stuff around and telling people to quit violating his Father's house. He proclaims the Temple is supposed to be "a house of prayer for all people and you have turned it into a den of thieves."

We can understand how the chief priests and elders feel: who does this guy think he is to do such a thing in the holiest place on earth, the place where heaven and earth are joined. They are furious because Jesus acts like he's the owner and they are the robbers!

On the next day after this dramatic event, Jesus returns to the Temple and the leaders ask him, "by what authority are you doing such things? Who put **you** in charge of God's house?"

It's a fair and central question.

After two millennia the answer rolls easily off our tongues: "Jesus is Lord, God's Messiah, so he has God's authority.

It's what Paul says today "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...."

At the end of our prayers we say "through Jesus Christ our Lord". During Lent we pray, "Kyrie, Eleison", "Lord, have mercy."

But during this time of pandemic and political upheaval we desperately need to reflect on what it means to call Jesus "Lord", because we remember Jesus himself tells us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

In Paul's time it means no one else is Lord—not Caesar, not the Roman Empire, not his Jewish heritage. Only Jesus is Lord.

**If Jesus is our Lord, then the President is not, the Supreme Court is not, my race and heritage is not Lord. I am not Lord.**

**But Think about it: Do we really want to believe a Jewish peasant crucified by Rome is the world's Lord? Is my Lord?**

How can this be since we normally measure such power in aircraft, tanks, and ships. We expect our Lord on a warhorse, **but what we get is an unarmed Jew riding on a donkey to die.**

If, as materialists, we only see the man Jesus, then his Lordship is hard to see.

But when we start where the New Testament does it's a different story.

Remember how John begins his gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

This Word, Logos in Greek, is the perfect expression of God. The Word is the pattern of everything that is made. Every blade of grass, every whale and walrus, is made through the express action of the Word who is God.

Every time we look at a tree, we should see not just what is visible, the leaves, branches and trunk, but we should also see the enormous root system deep in the ground and deeper still the Word of God holding that tree in existence.

As the great 4<sup>th</sup> century Saint Athanasius, champion of the Nicene Creed, put it: "For no part of creation is left void of the Word; while abiding with his own Father, he has filled all things in every place... For the Word unfolded himself everywhere and everything is filled with the knowledge of God." *On the Incarnation*, page 66

From the moment of the Big Bang 13 billion years ago, Athanasius says, "The God Word-was both in everything and outside all."

If Jesus is to be our Lord, this is where we start in understanding who he is. Then are we ready to take in John's extraordinary statement: "And the Word became a human being and dwelt among us."

Jesus is Lord—Word of God made flesh, only Son of the Father, the Cosmic Expression of the Living God in human form.

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Of course, the crucial question is how do we follow this Lord? As usual Jesus offers us a story: A man had two sons: one says **with his lips**, yes, Father, I'll go work for you today, but **with his life** he acts out: "No thanks, I've got more important things to do."

The other son, says **with his lips**, "Sorry, Dad, I've got a big date" but later changes his mind, that is, repents, and **with his life** says, "I'll work for you."

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Early on in my ministry fellow clergy and friends, wanting to know how successful I was or wasn't, would ask, "How many members does your church have?" The thought being, large membership means successful and worthy of respect, but a small membership not so much.

After a few years it became clear that the number of members on a church roll is not a meaningful number, because in that number are a lot of people who have said "Yes" with their lips but "No", with their lives.

Today, we ask, "what is your average Sunday attendance." Who has skin in the game by showing up on a regular basis? And how many of these gives, not \$20 in the plate every so often, but a percentage of their income to the work of Christ through the church?

But then again, I've also seen churches packed with people who did not worship Jesus as Lord, but some amalgam of "Jesus and America" or "Christ and the stock exchange".

We remember the line attributed to Sinclair Lewis in the previous century: "When fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross".

**Therefore, what matters is not those who say "Jesus is Lord", but those who live "Jesus is Lord."**

The prophet Micah tells us: "and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

It's way we pray in the General Thanksgiving at the end Morning Prayer:

"And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, **not only with our lips, but in our lives,** by giving up our selves to your service...."

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**But here's the thing:** Most of us who follow Christ as Lord, take to heart Paul when he says, we must "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling". And that's a good thing.

But it is also important to believe him when he finishes the sentence with, "**for it is God who is at work in you**, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

**This is the key: God is at work in you...and me...and us.**

Believe this today and live!

When we desire to live as if Jesus is Lord, we are putting all our chips on Jesus and none on ourselves.

We continually must throw off all the idolatrous images of God and remember that Jesus defines for us the nature and character of the God. In the words of former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams:

"But the God of the Bible, and above all the God of Jesus, is not our rival or our examiner or our prosecutor but our lover." Rowan Williams, ABC