

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Pentecost ("Christ the King")
Proper 29
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 / Psalm 93 / Revelation 1:4b-8 / John 18:33-37

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Christ the King and the Prosperity Gospel

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

This week there appeared a fascinating article in *Atlantic Monthly Online* by Hanna Rosin about the "prosperity gospel." It's a movement that began in the last decade or so amongst some Pentecostal churches and now has grown to encompass several megachurch and evangelical Christian communities around the country. It begins with the premise that God has great plans and intentions for us – so far, so good. But then it goes on to encourage its adherents to take enormous financial risks in their businesses and personal lives – the bigger the better, whether it's the larger home, the more expensive car, or the more profitable business. Why? Because God rewards us for risk-taking, and the God of abundance has money – lots of money – waiting for the faithful as part of his gracious plan for their lives.

The insidious message – often unspoken, of course – is that if you lose everything, it may indicate a lack of divine favor. . . or your lack of faith. Even more insidious I find is that this prosperity gospel is fundamentally about *me*. It is a crowning achievement for the noblest of our contemporary heresies in the West. As Katharine Jefferts Schori, our Presiding Bishop, put it earlier this year: somehow my salvation is so individualized that it has little if anything to do with *your* salvation, let alone *ours*.

And here's another rub for us to ponder this day: the movement claims several million Christian adherents across the country. I wonder if it's the latest manifestation of American civil religion. But an even more sobering thought appeared when the author of the article pondered – amidst images of keys to an expensive late model car or a pile of cash on the altar – that the "prosperity gospel" movement has its roots and strongest following in the parts of the country where another pattern in contemporary American society had its origins recently. The "prosperity gospel" appears most prevalent where the subprime mortgage crisis hit hardest, and where the real-estate market crash was deepest. In fact, the article's title asks, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?"¹

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We close the church year today with this conversation between Jesus and Pilate in The Gospel According to John. It's familiar, yet still strange to my ears. It seems the classic study of two people, however well-

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/rosin-prosperity-gospel>

intentioned in their discourse, talking past each other. At the center of the conversation is the subject of kingship and kingdom.

“Are you a king?” Pilate wants to know of Jesus. If so, does Jesus pose a threat to the Roman occupation? Or to the power of the Emperor? We can surmise Pilate’s perspective simply on the basis of a bit of history. He had been sent by the bright capital of Rome to this small, dusty, stubbornly monotheistic and somewhat troubling and troubled little nation of Israel to keep it in line. That meant keeping the tribute flowing in the right direction and keeping some semblance of order and peace for the sake of the economy and stability of the wider Empire.

So Jesus’ being a king matters to Pilate in as much as it might threaten the political, economic, and military order of the day. Pilate, like all governors past and present, has a job to do, and wants to know all he can to carry it out successfully. And that means knowing where the threats are, and eliminating them with as much dispatch and efficiency as possible.

All this language from Christ Jesus about “truth” and a kingdom “not of this world” is as nonsensical and pie-in-the-sky to Pilate as theology and philosophy might be to a pragmatic, power-focused politician of our day. It is no small disclosure that Pilate concludes the conversation with Jesus immediately following this passage with those three infamous words, “What is truth?” Pilate concludes, at least in part, that since Jesus poses no military or political threat, he’s irrelevant.

Pilate just doesn’t get it.

Nor, quite frankly, do we much of the time. Jesus’ truth often eludes us in our widely pragmatic and carefully compromised lives. We, like Pilate, live in a world of choices, none of which are perfect, and which are often governed by the rules of a kingdom akin to Pilate’s. We are possessed by questions about what are we *empowered* to do? What is the best *economic* choice for us or our households, or our businesses, or our communities? What leaves us most *in control* of outcomes? Like Pilate’s world, our world – our kingdom much of the time – is measurable, and quantifiable. It is built on carefully generated and maintained structures of power. It can be weighed and judged accordingly. We know where we are headed in life by how we are measurably ahead (or behind) of where we were yesterday. This is the kingdom we have been given. And, it should be no mystery, that this is the kingdom of the so-called “prosperity gospel.” We shouldn’t wonder at its popularity. Truth is, we’re all adherents of the “prosperity gospel” in some way.

We have our bank accounts, households, and our work and businesses. Our balance sheets. Even our ecclesiastical institutions. We have our authority. We have our risk-taking measures, and guidelines. We are well-studied in calculation for what’s best for ourselves, and sometimes what’s best for others. This is not all bad, of course. Sometimes – even often – we are in position to do great good with these powers. Pilate could, I suppose, have been a “good Governor,” after all. History tells us otherwise, but that’s the subject for another time. In any case, surely there are good governors at times in the Roman Empire.

But back to us. What we want is a Jesus who rewards us for our faith, and in terms that we understand. We want a King who responds to our prayers for more money in the bank and greater security for ourselves and our loved ones – even prosperity for our community and the nation. We’re audacious enough to ask. Never hurts to ask, right? But today’s Gospel reminds us today, as we wind down this church year and prepare to open the door to the transformation of Advent, that Christ is King . . . but not King of the “prosperity Gospel.”

Our King in Christ Jesus does not control outcomes through force or coercion, through cleverness or calculation. Rather, we are wooed as lovers to a table for the food and drink of transformation, the stuff of eternal life that bucks the terrible self-possessed ossification of our hearts that makes only for a spiritual death. Poverty or prosperity, or both, may await us at God’s table. But there are no guarantees it will look like anything the world recognizes with its weights and measures. What is guaranteed is that our hearts will be challenged to be chastened, strengthened, and softened and ultimately open to our God. . . so that we may be remade however God wants us.

Our King in Christ does not demand tribute of us or give us a list of rules by which we are measured. Instead, we are invited to act generously and live by a law of love that is not written in black-and-white and objectified for eternity, but is written on the tenderness of the human heart. We may follow the laws we have inherited from our ancestors and delivered from our politicians, but we are most beholden to the law that comes from a humble heart: acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

Our King in Christ does not measure our success by money in the bank, or the strength of our business acumen. And here’s a tough one for all the educated among us: nor are we measured by our intelligence, our rhetorical skills, or our knowledge. Rather, we are measured by the yardstick of grace – which, curiously to all of us, my beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, measures not where we are at the present time, but where God’s hopes dreams, and love for us forges us and remakes us over a lifetime and beyond. And those divine hopes are so far beyond our intellectual grasp that we can scarcely imagine them. We are only invited to live into them, one day, one mysterious moment at a time.

Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. Nor is Christ’s kingdom made up of that pie-in-the-sky afterlife we sometimes call heaven in contemporary popular Christianity. Christ’s kingdom begins here, in our hearts, and in the transformed relationships around us. Christ’s kingdom is found in the loving words and the healing touches that nurture community. Christ’s kingdom is in the memory that jumps the yard-arm of death and binds us as a family beyond time. Christ’s kingdom is in tender thoughts and brave actions for the least among us. And Christ’s kingdom is found when pick up the Gospel of self-offering so that others might have life, and have it abundantly. Because in Christ’s kingdom, we belong to each other, and we together belong, along with our salvation, most of all to Christ our King, who loves us from before time.