

“The Reign of Christ” / Revelation 1:4-8 / 25 November 2012

Each November, we finish out the church year with a lesser-known holiday called “Christ the King” or “The Reign of Christ.” It’s a day when our Scripture readings and our hymns declare that Jesus of Nazareth is “the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever.” But what does that mean, really? It’s an old, old question: What is power? Who should wield it? Can power be truly good?

Occasionally, here at Bower Hill, we hold events that I have started calling “Diaspora funerals.” The Diaspora—as you may know—consists of all the descendents of the Hebrew people who now live outside of Israel: all the many little enclaves of Judaism from Siberia to Squirrel Hill. But Israel isn’t the only land whose people are scattered abroad. Pittsburgh has its own largely gentile Diaspora, which gains national attention whenever the Steelers play in the Super Bowl. They call it “The Steelers Nation.” And so, a Diaspora funeral at Bower Hill Church isn’t a Jewish funeral; it’s a service for members of the great Pittsburgh Diaspora, now living in all different corners of the country. There are people 3,000 miles away who haven’t set foot on Pennsylvania soil in decades, but they still consider it home. Some of those folks still consider Bower Hill their church. And it’s here that they want to return in the end.

Back in October, I did a small double-Diaspora funeral for a couple who moved away from the area thirty years ago. The husband died twelve years ago, and the wife only seven months ago, but the family—which is spread from Philadelphia to Oregon—wanted to reunite here and commemorate the couple’s lives in a single service. And so, they held their father’s ashes for twelve years until mom died, so that they could all gather back here at Bower Hill Church.

Now, the best funerals contain an element of joy, especially as the family members tell stories about the deceased—which is an important part of the grieving process. The family had told me beforehand that mom and dad were as different as night and day, though they loved each other deeply. Dad was a no nonsense banker, fiscally and socially conservative. Mom took the children to marches, protesting the war in Vietnam. Her faith was mostly of the activist variety, and after leaving Bower Hill, she never found another congregation that appreciated her, so she gave up on church. And when I met the adult sons, I found one who seemed quite old school. He worked in finance, like his dad, and he had the look of a professional man: a good suit of recent cut, a staid demeanor. He was an elder in a Presbyterian congregation. The other son had long hair, a weathered face, and a shaggy beard; he was the only person in the crowd dressed in jeans. This son approached the lectern very nervously to read his appointed passage from the Gospel of John. He took a deep breath and growled, “You want to know what John said? I’ll tell you what John said.” Then he proceeded to read not from the Gospel of John but from a song by John Lennon: “Imagine there’s no heaven. It’s easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there’s no countries [and presumably no grammar] and no religion, too.” When he was finished reading those lyrics, he shouted at the urns, “That one’s for you, mom!” The other brother was mortified. Fortunately, I was not preaching from the John text that day. And when the time came for the family to share their stories, they sat right out there in the pews and spoke up as they felt the urge. The only daughter said, “Mom used to tell us, ‘You’re wonderful. You’re beautiful. You can be or do anything.’ Dad used to tell us, ‘Your intelligence is about average, so don’t get carried away’.”

How is it that the same two parents can raise their children in the same home, in the same community, attending the same church and the same school, and yet they turn out to be as different from each other as those two brothers? Surely it all comes down to the mystery of influence. And as I pondered the lives of these two deceased strangers, these members of the Pittsburgh Diaspora who never returned except as ashes, I couldn't help but marvel at how much influence the father had had on one child, and how much influence the mother had had on the other. And those influences will continue into the lives of their children's children, and perhaps someday their grandchildren's children ad infinitum. On this Christ the King Sunday, it must be said that if the humble Jesus of Nazareth is a king, and if his reign is established here on earth—a claim that sometimes seems dubious at best—then he reigns not by power but by influence. Power is backed by the threat of force, whereas influence only works if it's accepted freely.

Besides, power is slippery and dangerous. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Power is notoriously difficult to grab and keep. And even those who have power are always struggling to maintain it. Power can make you suspicious and arrogant. Power can pretend to reside in one spot when in fact, it resides someplace else entirely. Consider the Queen of England with all her majestic trappings, her palaces, her crown, and her throne. In all her regal splendor, she actually has very little real power. She has influence and the mystique of power, but almost no control over the lives of her subjects. You also have churches like ours where you might assume that the minister is in charge, but he's not. The minister can and should influence a congregation, but most control is in the hands of laypeople. Power creates pressure to conform. Influence leads by example.

In the 1400s, France had a treacherous and scheming king named Louis XI. This king was a very superstitious man and a big believer in astrology. But when his astrologer's predictions started coming true, the king got scared and thought it best to have the man put to death. The astrologer was dragged from his home in the middle of the night and brought before the king. Louis XI asked the man, mockingly, "So, wizard, if you can see the future, tell me when you are going to die." The man wisely answered, "I will die three days before your majesty." The king allowed the man to live. Unlimited power isn't good for the people who wield it. The kings of old had no law higher than themselves, and so many of them became petty, and desperate, and cruel. This is why so many people find the notion of "Christ the King Sunday" a little bit troubling. Both its political and its psychological implications fly in the face of that humble carpenter-turned-rabbi, who resisted the temptation to resort to force. He was powerless in the eyes of this world, perhaps unlettered, of humble origins. And yet, his influence has lasted, lo, these two millennia. His reign is simple service to the world, not power over it.

Power breaks things. But the influence of a good and kind person can change the course of history. Today we are sending out the Haiti travel team to address the needs of the poorest country in this hemisphere. Our team will have no power over the Haitians, or how they perceive us, or whether they arrive on time to meetings. We certainly have no power over the circumstances that pummel Haiti. But our influence can save lives and shape hearts for generations. Today, too, we baptize Lilly Philson. We have no power even over our children; they will be who they will be. But we can influence them into life-affirming ways. We have very little real power, which is fine because power is risky. But our influence spreads far and wide. Do you struggle for power that, in the end, can only cause harm? Put aside the quest for control, and embrace the reign of Christ.