

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY | NOVEMBER 22, 2020

EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20-24 | PSALM 95:1-7A | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | MATTHEW 25:31-46

Last month, the *Washington Post* ran a good article by Sarah Pulliam Bailey about the rise of so-called Patriot Churches.¹ Patriot Churches are sort of like evangelical churches. Many of their theological views would be right at home in evangelical circles and their services look like something you'd find at an evangelical church. But those beliefs are mixed in with a political ideology best described as Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is kind of hard to describe, you know it when you see it, but the basic idea is that the United States is a Christian nation that has a unique purpose within God's saving history that other countries don't have.² Christian nationalists believe that Christianity in America is under threat and needs to be protected by strong leaders. Once those leaders are in place, the culture will be restored to its rightful orientation, the country will be able to serve God's purposes again, and the kingdom of God will be at hand.³

Most of the article focuses on the political engagement of these churches and their members. Their partisan alignment is both predictable and not terribly interesting. The more substantive question, the reason I think these churches are actually worth thinking about, is how these churches view power, authority, and legitimacy. In the world of Christian nationalism, power means getting people to do things. Authority has to be defended against outside attacks. And legitimacy comes from eliminating dissent and deliberation.

Patriot Church is almost a caricature of itself, but you can find some of their beliefs in more genteel settings. We think of power and influence and authority mostly the way the world does. You have power when you can win friends and influence people. And if you can't win friends, just influence people.

And so we fight to keep Christian holidays on the school calendar. We go to court so we can put a creche on public land. We use Christian belief as a proxy for respectability. When people complain about the decline of Christianity in America, they're not complaining that the sacraments have stopped being efficacious or the parables have gotten boring or the promises of God are starting to wear thin. They're complaining about a loss of power and privilege.

This idea would have struck the early church as absurd. One of the best ways to learn about the early church is to read how people outside the community viewed them. And when you do that, two things become immediately clear. The first is that people in positions of power viewed the early believers as weird. What they found especially bizarre were their views of money and status. In the second century, an author named Lucian wrote a satire about how Christians "despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property."⁴ The punch line of his satire was that Christians gave money to people in prison who didn't deserve their sympathy. They're suckers. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian complained that the Christians kept selling their goods and giving the proceeds to the poor. What was even more confusing to Julian was that they were giving money to people to people who weren't even Christians. They're losers.

¹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Seeking Power in Jesus' Name: Trump Sparks a Rise of Patriot Churches," *Washington Post*, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/10/26/trump-christian-nationalism-patriot-church/>.

² Patriot Church describes the United States as a "move of God," language reminiscent of the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit. If this seems like idolatry since it equates an act of God (the incarnation) with an act of humanity (the Constitutional Convention), you're on the right track. (Good for you!)

³ It's frequently asked what the difference between patriotism and nationalism is. One pithy answer is that patriots love their fellow citizens and nationalists think their fellow citizens are better than citizens of other nations. This works well enough for what we're doing here.

⁴ Quoted in Roman A. Montero, *All Things in Common: The Economic Practices of the Early Christians* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

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And that confusion over why people would behave this way led many people in power to see the church as a threat. Because their behavior was so unexpected and irrational, it called into question the normal ways of doing things. In Rome, it was common to have these festivals for the emperor where the aristocrats would pay for everyone to have a big party where they made sacrifices to the emperor.⁵ And these early believers wouldn't go. Sure, they'd pray for the emperor and pay their taxes, but they weren't going to go do the sacrifice stuff. And so people began to think that they were up to something.

Christians began to be seen as dangerous not because they were going to start an armed rebellion, but because they appealed to an authority above the emperor. They were dangerous because they might delegitimize the story that the emperor told about what was good, who was worthy, and where you could find salvation. They were dangerous not because they challenged the authority of the Roman Empire but because they were ambivalent about it. They saw the emperor as provisional. They had a different vision of what it meant to be powerful.

That vision is what is at the heart of today's gospel reading. Before his crucifixion, Jesus tells the disciples that there will be a time when people are called to account for their actions, when the sheep will be separated from the goats, when goodness will be separated from evil. This isn't terribly surprising. What is surprising is Jesus's suggestion that the judgements of God might differ from the judgements of people. Our vision of what it is to be powerful, useful, influential, is different from God's. What we see in the disciples' response (When was it that we did this?), is our own failure to recognize ourselves and the meaning of our actions.

The disciples' confused and befuddled response to Jesus mirrors the response to the witness of the early church. Because people misunderstand what it means to be powerful, to have influence, to be in the presence of Christ. It was when you were doing the things that seemed foolish and when you were doing the things that seemed bizarre and when you were doing the things that seemed unnecessary that you were in the presence of Christ. You conveyed the power of God not when you got more influence or more wealth or more status but when you visited the imprisoned, when you welcomed the stranger, when you clothed the naked.

That judgement and the recalibration it requires in our moral vision is what Christ the King Sunday brings to the fore. That it is the moral vision of the kingdom of God that has ultimate importance and deserves final allegiance. Jesus is not a king next to other kings, a ruler next to other rulers, an authority next to other authorities. Jesus's judgements don't need to be defended or protected or upheld by our own arguments.⁶

This is ultimately where Christian nationalism goes all awry. It has no sense of irony. No sense of reversal. No sense of redemption. No trust that God is present in weakness, in solidarity with the suffering, and present on the margins. It tells you everything you need to know that the church Pulliam Bailey visited has a sixty-foot American flag painted on the roof but no cross in the sanctuary. And why would they? Only losers get crucified.

One of my favorite descriptions of the power of God comes from a book by Sara Miles called *Jesus Freak*. Miles was working as an Episcopal priest when her congregation decided to start a food pantry in their sanctuary. And at first, people were all excited about serving their community. But then people started showing up and taking an extra box of food here and there. Sometimes people would load up on food and drive away in nice cars. Or people would be rude to the volunteers.

⁵ "The Collision With Paganism | From Jesus To Christ - The First Christians | FRONTLINE | PBS," accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/paganism.html>.

⁶ "The Two Ways," Plough, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/the-two-ways-williams>.

And pretty soon the church members started to complain that people were taking advantage of the food pantry. And Miles would try to explain that since the food was a gift, you couldn't take advantage of it. It wasn't like a trade or exchange where you expected something in return. You can take advantage of someone during an exchange. You can't take advantage of a gift. Her members were unconvinced.

Around the same time, Miles was talking to a group of fourth graders and when she mentioned the food pantry, the kids immediately identified the problem. If you give people food, they'll take advantage of you. And so Miles went through the whole thing about gifts and exchanges again. And then one of the kids said, "It's cool how people can't take advantage of you. That sort of means the pantry is invincible."⁷

When we say that Christ is king, that's what we're talking about. That in Jesus, God does not make us wealthy or privileged or well-off or triumphant or powerful. But the mercy of God makes us invincible.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁷ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 37.