

Do We Really Want Jesus As Lord?

^{NRS} Col 1:11 May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Well, happy Christ the King Sunday to you, or merry Christ the King Sunday to you, or whatever it is you're supposed to say today. Yeah, Christ the king Sunday- not one of our better known holidays, is it? Don't feel bad if you don't know it that well- it hasn't been around that long. In comparison with Easter, our oldest holiday, or Epiphany, our second oldest, Christ the king is the most recent, first celebrated in only 1925. Who started it? That household name, good ol' Pope Pious the IX. Pious the IX was terrified by the atheism of the Russian revolution, and so he said we should start celebrating Christ the King Sunday as a way of combating this kind of thing. For him Christ the King Sunday was a way of saying, "*CHRIST* is king- not your governments, not your modern innovations, but Christ!"

Now, I'll be honest with you. I've watched Dr. Zhivago. I know the Russian revolution wasn't a great thing. But I think it's a terrible idea to set up a holiday just as a way of saying we don't like what you're doing. This is exactly the kind of thing that makes us in the church look so defensive, so unChrist-like to the rest of God's children. The Barna group, a church survey group talked to over a 1,000 people, and this is what

they discovered: 87 percent say they think the church is judgmental; and 85 percent call us hypocritical.

It just kills me that this is what folks think, but I totally understand where they're coming from. The other night Melis and I watched that great Nova special on Science, Creationism, and Intelligent Design. When the school district of Dover Delaware voted to uphold science and not allow creationism and intelligent design to be taught, Nova showed a clip of Pat Robertson who addressed the citizens of Dover telling them don't be surprised if they suffer a natural disaster because they rejected God. I mean come on. A vote doesn't go the way you like and then you tell people you hope your petulant God goes Katrina on them?

So there's part of me that just wants to let Christ the King Sunday go. There's part of me that doesn't want to follow in the footsteps of good ol' Pious the IX. I don't want to be part of a faith that's so frightened and weak it has to put others down in order to prop itself up.

But then after I thought about it some more, I started to think that maybe Pious the IX actually did have a good idea with this whole Christ the King thing, even if he didn't really mean to. What I mean is that Christ the King Sunday *is* lousy if we're just aiming it at others, telling others they should put Jesus at the center of their lives, or else. But it might not be so bad, it might actually be a good thing if we allow it to point the finger at us- to ask ourselves whether we really follow Jesus as Lord, or King, or if we just say this from time to time.

This was what the deal was with the Colossians that Paul was writing to. On the one hand they started a church there in the city, and they all said that instead of Caesar, that Christ was their *basileus*, which in English means lord or king. But then in practice it turns out they really weren't all that sure. It's not that they were rejecting Jesus- they just weren't sure he was enough. And so they added all these secret teachings and hard practices. It's like just plain ol' vanilla faith wasn't enough- they had to make it harder or more complicated. Some churches still do this. Some folks say faith alone isn't enough- no, you have to speak in tongues or manifest some other gift like that. Or sometimes in traditions like ours we say it isn't enough that you want to follow Jesus, but then you have to become Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Roman Catholic, or whatever, and sign on to all this other stuff Jesus never even dreamed of saddling us with even on his worst day.

No, the Colossians weren't comfortable with Jesus being their only Lord- they felt like they needed to add things, to make it more complicated, to make it harder. Things have more meaning for us when we pay for them. Ever heard of anyone washing their rental car, or changing its oil? Of course not.

We're a lot like the Colossians. I think the hardest thing in the world is walking in the way of Jesus and then trusting that this is really enough- that we don't need anything else to make us lovable or valuable. And I know as a pastor I'm not supposed to say this, but there's even a part of me that doesn't want Jesus to be my lord, my center. And it's not because I've got something against Jesus. I think he's just great. But there's an independent part of me that fights the thought of anyone, even Jesus, guiding me, and crafting my life. I'm that guy who knows even though I'm not always that great of a

driver, I'm still more comfortable when I'm at the wheel. I can be crashing and burning, but at least it's ME crashing and burning.

So, I thought what I'd do this morning is tell you about three phases in my life and how it's been difficult for me to really follow Jesus and claim him as Lord. If you're a lot better at this than I am, than after worship tell me your secrets. We'll write a book together. For the rest of you, my hope is that in my own journey, you may hear something helpful for you, too.

So I thought I'd use pictures to set the stage a little bit. This first one is when I



was 16 and just about to head into high school. Let's see- yes. Yes, that is excellent, isn't it? Many of you didn't know I spent my former life as a poodle. Yeah, I'd love to tell you this was at least in the 80's when this kind of hair was at least sort of in style, but this picture was taken in 1991.

Now it's easy for me to talk about how I resisted claiming Jesus as king when this picture was taken, because at that point in my life I really wouldn't have said such a thing. People say, but you grew up in the church. You've always been Presbyterian. And this is true- but this doesn't mean all my experience was good! No, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to sign on with Jesus.

But you know what- as strange as it sounds, when I look back on this period of my life, in some ways, in some ways I think this was the time in my life I was the best disciple. Despite my concerns, my doubts- I still kept going to church with my mom. I didn't always say all the prayers. I definitely didn't believe everything I heard. But I went nevertheless. And I participated with mission, and I hung out in the adult ed classes and asked annoying questions. But I ask you- what's more faithful: to sort of believe everything but never to really think about it, or to not believe anything, but to think about it, to wrestle over it a lot? Which is harder- to go to church when you agree with everything, or to go when you don't?

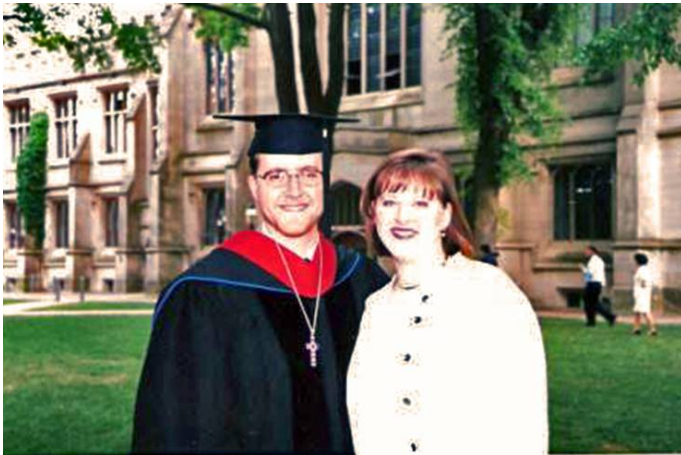
I look at this time in my life and even though if you asked me I would have told you Jesus was definitely not my Lord- I would not have liked that language. However, I was following after Jesus with my head and my heart in a way I'm only now beginning to appreciate.

So here's one thing I beg of you. If your kids, or your family member, or anyone you really care about- if they don't say all the things you think they should about God, if they don't show up to church all the time, if they question their faith- please, please, please DO NOT argue with them. Don't do that. Don't try to defend God- God is big and doesn't need our help. Do listen to them and honor their questions. Some of them might be pretty good. And do tell them about your own faith IF they ask you. Whatever you do, try not to be afraid if they criticize the church or tell you they don't believe in God. The church needs criticism, believe me. And it's hard to believe in God. I find it helps to remember that the main point of the Bible isn't that we get our act together and believe in God, but that God believes in us before we've figured everything out. You

know Jesus goes to Simon Peter and just says “Follow me”. He doesn’t say follow me- ohp, wait! Before you follow me- I need to get correct answers out of you for the following 10 questions. No, being a disciple is about following Jesus- not having right opinions about him.

And if you yourself are sitting here today wondering what am I doing here? Do I really belong here in a church? You know, all these people seem to have everything all together. Please know you are not only welcome here- but you, and your questions, and your journey- you belong here. The book of Acts tells us the earliest name for the Christians was people of the way. People of the way. Not people who have figured everything out and are at the destination- but people of the way. People who are traveling together.

So what about the next phase of my life. Ah, here Melis and I are in front of what



they call Princeton Chapel. It’s more like Princeton Gothic Cathedral, but they call it a chapel. This was the day I graduated from seminary, this is a great picture to represent this next phase of my faith journey where I

not only claimed Jesus as my lord, but I committed my life to the church. And I had the privilege of studying at an amazing place like Princeton. I no longer looked like I refugee from the 80’s. Now, you would think that this would have brought about a huge

improvement in my life and my ability to seek after Jesus. This should have made me like a better person, right?

Yeah, if anything, I think keeping Jesus at my center was harder at seminary than at any other time in my life. It was a confusing time- learning so many different things, and seeing the faith from so many different perspectives. And yes Princeton is a great name, but so many times I found myself wondering if Jesus would have had much interest in a place sitting on 945 million dollars, the current level of the endowment. Who needs faith when you have 945 million dollars? And that attitude rubbed off a little bit.

I remember when I worked in the hospital as a chaplain, one of my friends there was a man named Gabe. I say friend- in retrospect I have to admit I wasn't very kind to him. Gabe was this energetic guy, always wanting to do trauma, and work with extreme cases. He was always talking. I remember he was always asking me questions about my beliefs about women in the ministry and my openness towards gays and lesbians. And I was always blowing him off. Gabe was Pentecostal and went to this tiny little seminary- I just made the assumption that he wasn't really all that interested in my complicated Biblical and theological arguments. And really, I made the assumption he wasn't capable.

One of my friends who I've stayed in touch with, Doug, has always kept in touch with Gabe. They both stayed in the area, and Doug told me the last time we talked how close he and Gabe have become. Gabe ended up not only finishing his M.Div but completely his Ph.D in theology as well. I always just thought he wasn't asking honestly- that he wanted to argue. It turns out Gabe was completely honest. I was the

one who was not. I acted nice towards him and got along, when really I didn't think very much of him.

We do that, don't we? We make assumptions about people we hardly even know- based on things as ridiculous as what school they've gone to, or haven't gone to, or their faith tradition, or what they look like. This is arrogance. And it certainly is not walking in the way of Jesus. For all of my nuanced and sophisticated theological training- there were so many days I followed after other Lords in seminary- the Lord of prestige chief among them. I wonder if there is someone in your life you're making assumptions about this day- or you will in the week ahead. Someone you think you know. Just remember that if Jesus is Lord- our assumptions aren't.

Well, this brings me to our last picture. This unfortunate picture was taken at Camp Magruder up at Rockaway beach last year on retreat with the youth. I fell in love with this picture of Jesus I like to call 'Jesusbert Humperdink'. Even though he's holding on to the netting of the boat, it looks for all the world to me like he's got a microphone. And with the way he's smiling at us- I don't know, it made me feel like there's hope for all lounge singers everywhere.

The most amazing thing about the piece Paul writes to the Colossians is that he doesn't yell at them for being such lousy



disciples- for following after so many other lords besides Jesus. No. You know what he does? He simply tells them how he sees it- that whether or not they're doing a good job following him- he's not leaving their side. Paul writes in sweeping terms that all things come to have their being through Christ- and most amazingly, that in him everything holds together. I love this line. The original Greek is even better- rather than 'in him everything holds together' the line is *kai ta panta sun autoi sunesteken*, and *sunesteken* literally means to stand with, or to stand by, exactly like Jesus stands by me here in this nutty picture. Paul says in Christ all things come into being, and he stands beside us all, no matter what.

He stands beside us all no matter what. Whether we've got bad poodle hair, or whether chemo has taken our hair. He stands by us whether we've got some faith, no faith, or our faith is just brimming over. He's stands beside us, one and all. No exceptions. **Amen.**