

Sermon – “Our Sovereign, Our Sin, Our Kirk”

Scripture: Psalm 93, Revelation 1:4-8

St. Andrew’s Sunday, November 22, 2015

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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Psalm 93. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God’s holy Word.

1 The Lord is king, God is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, God is girded with strength. The Lord has established the world; it shall never be moved; 2 your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. 3 The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. 4 More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord! 5 Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore. Amen.

The New Testament reading for Christ the King and St. Andrew’s Sunday is from the book of Revelation, first chapter.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. Blessed be this reading from God’s Word.

The title of the sermon: “Our Sovereign, Our Sin, Our Kirk”

Let us pray: Grant, O God, that we may find our life, salvation, and the church all within your dominion and your reign. In Christ, we pray. Amen.

In the summer of 1984, my family and I participated in a pulpit exchange with a minister and his family who lived in Scotland. The Reverend Mr. Alastair Symington and his family came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to live in our home, to drive our car, and to preach in the church where I was the pastor. Likewise we Stuarts went to live in his home, drive his car, and preach in his church. It was a wonderful time.

We learned Alastair’s car had a stick-shift. It was mounted on the steering wheel. We learned to drive the car while driving on the wrong side of the road. It was not too difficult until we came to traffic roundabouts. A roundabout is a circle you drive around until you peel off onto the street you want to take. These were challenging enough, but then there were the dreaded double-roundabouts.

We learned the people of Scotland like bagpipers, but as one man told us, “Aye, we like our pipers, one hill away.”

We learned about the beauties of Scotland's land, rivers, coasts, glens, villages and towns and cities. The church we were with was near Edinburgh so we had lots of time to explore it. When we returned for a second exchange in 1988 we were near Glasgow and explored it. We came to love the little fishing villages north of the Firth of Forth.

We learned that watching the Olympics as broadcast by the BBC was almost like watching a different Olympics. The featured athletes and teams were British. We had no idea there were so many competitions involving horses.

But one of the most significant learnings was about preaching and theology. The people of my church back in Upper St. Clair told me when we returned that the sermons they heard from Alastair were very theological. The people in the church where I was preaching seemed abit hard pressed to say what it was they thought about my preaching but it came out sort of along the lines of: you preach more about personal matters. They were clearly used to sermons that had more theological content, more discussion of doctrine and belief.

I

On this St. Andrews' Sunday it is worth noting this difference in preaching content. It points us back to a time when sermons were much more theological. They were about beliefs, the right beliefs, the wrong beliefs, the advantages of true beliefs and the dangers of wrong beliefs.

In ways that are hard for us to even imagine, especially going back to the time of the Reformation, to the time of John Knox and John Calvin, theology was enormously important. They lived their lives with a persistent and immediate sense of the presence, the powers and the mysteries of God. Their relationship to God mattered greatly. Where they came down in the religious wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants was often and for many years a matter of life and death. In some ways the religious wars in Europe during the Reformation were as cruel and gruesome as the current religious wars among Muslims.

One of the beliefs that was central to people like Calvin and Knox was their belief in the sovereignty of God.

The word "sovereignty" is not at all common for us. It was for them. They knew about sovereigns. Sovereigns were kings or queens. They were individuals with enormous power. By and large their decrees were laws. Their demands for loyalty were not to be defied.

It was easy then for them to refer to the sovereignty of God. The bible, of course, is full of references to the sovereignty of God, the Kingdom of God, and the Lordship of God. Psalm 93 is simply one place. It begins with the declaration, "The Lord is king." Not "a king". Not "one among others". But, "The Lord is king." It refers to the Lord robed, evoking the image of how a king in those days would be robed in fine and expensive clothing. In verses three and four the word "majestic" is repeated three times. Then in Revelation we are told that Jesus Christ now rules as King with God and that Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the sovereign, the Lord, before whom there are no others and after whom there will be no others.

One of the people who explored what the sovereignty of God means with remarkable biblical knowledge and intellectual energy was John Calvin. In his formative work, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, in Book One, Chapter 16 is entitled "God by His Power Nourishes and Maintains

the World Created by Him, and Rules Its Several Parts by His Providence”.¹ In the pages that follow, Calvin over and over again rejects the notion that God simply set creation in motion and then stood aside. Calvin asserts God created and continues to be actively engaged in creation and actively engaged throughout creation. He also asserts that all of God’s actions are intended for the welfare and benefit of humankind since God does so powerfully love us.

We live our whole lives in the presence of this God, the active and alert God. As Paul said to the Athenians in his speech at the Areopagus, “In him we live and move and have our being.”²

From this doctrine of the sovereignty of God, come two very basic themes. The first is pastoral in nature. Since God is sovereign, since God is actively engaged in our lives, and since God loves us, we may freely trust God labors on our behalf. The psalmist speaks of God walking with him in the valley of the shadow of death, not waiting at the end to see how he does, or watching from a hillside above the valley, but down in the valley, in the darkness, on the path with him. This is what Paul was praising in the passage from Romans. He writes that he is persuaded, convinced and certain nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. He believed this. He knew it. He had experienced it. It was not a doctrine or theory for Paul.

How many times have you and I sought that active love of God, that active sovereign love of God? How many times have we trusted it, leaned on it, and encouraged others to seek its life and restoring powers? How many times have we sought it for others?

The second theme which comes from our faith in the sovereignty of God is prophetic. Our whole life is lived in the presence of God and we are called to serve that God in all the activities and enterprises of our life. In commerce we are to be serving God. In social interactions we are to be serving God. In the use of our money, in the use of our talents, in the use of our sexuality we are to be serving God. In our politics we are to be serving God.

How many times have you heard someone say, “The church should stay out of politics.”? By a considerable number of bumps and bruises over the years, I learned that assertion has a number of meanings. For many people it means the church should stay out of partisan politics. They object, rightly so, when a sermon, for instance, simply parrots a partisan point of the view, the view of Republicans or the view of Democrats. When I was a seminary student I preached a sermon in 1967 and after church a man came out and said I sounded just like Robert Kennedy. I thought it was a compliment. I do not think that is what he meant. The saying the church should stay out of politics can also mean the church should stay out of politics because that is always controversial. The people who hold this view, are often people struggling with some tension in their lives already. They want some comfort and reassurance when they come to church. They do not want to come to church and get even more upset or sense the church itself getting riled up. Finally I have discovered sometimes when people say they do not want the church to get involved in politics, they really mean they want the church to stay out of their politics. They know what drives their political passions and they do not want the light of God in Christ to get too close. There is a degree to which we all fall into that category.

But politics is how we organize our life together as a society. The values we use are crucial to that process. Today is November 22. On this day in 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Five weeks before he had been at the college I attended for the dedication of a new library named

¹ Calvin, John, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Edited by John T. McNeill, Translated and Indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1960), p. 197.

² Acts 17:28

for Robert Frost. The President gave a speech on that occasion about poetry and power. In the speech he said something that is particularly germane these days:

The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when the questioning is disinterested, for they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our national strength matters, but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much.³

Our belief in the sovereignty of God calls us to use the values God reveals to us for life together and to give witness to those values, struggle for those values, and stay loyal to them in the politics of our country.

One of the telling ways that faith is overriding partisan passions that has arisen in just the past few days is the challenge from faith-based settled groups to the calls to shut down our acceptance of refugees from Syria. Last Wednesday, The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Association of Evangelicals working separately passed resolutions urging the government not to halt the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

So faith in the sovereignty of God can be deeply reassuring as it assures us of God's love and active care for us. Faith in the sovereignty of God can be controversial and risky as it calls us to show the kindness and the justice of God in all areas of life.

There is, of course, one abiding struggle over the sovereignty of God. It is about the intimate dance between God's sovereignty and our free will. Calvin could be very explicit. He writes, "...all events are governed by God's secret plan."⁴, "...nothing takes place without his (God's) deliberation."⁵, "...nothing takes place by chance."⁶ Yet Calvin also acknowledged our free will. One of my professors in seminary remarked that Calvin was sometimes victimized by his own logic. Most people believe there is some measure of genuine free will for us. It is still a matter of mystery just where God's power is exerted and where it holds back and just where our wills are free and where we led. It is likewise a matter of mystery to wonder when does God know of something that happens and when does God cause something to happen. To say, as Jesus does, that not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from God does not mean that God causes the fall of every sparrow.⁷

One of the people who struggled mightily with the mystery of free will and sovereignty was President Abraham Lincoln. A document which he wrote was found some time ago. Its existence was not known by Lincoln scholars for a long time. It is believed to have been written by Lincoln prior to his Second Inaugural Address. In this document, Lincoln is working out, trying to work out, for himself, just what role God has in the Civil War. He wonders how God is involved. He wonders if God willed the Civil War. He knows the dangers to assuming God would be on one side or the other, which reveals a remarkable depth of spiritual maturity. He wrote, in part:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong.

³ In Other Words – Amherst in Prose and Verse, Edited by Horace W. Hewlett, (Amherst College Press, Amherst, MA, 1964), p.187-88.

⁴ Calvin, p. 199

⁵ Calvin, p. 200

⁶ Calvin, p. 203

⁷ Matthew 10:29

God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party...

Sometimes after a struggle, a great national struggle or a personal struggle, we can see how God was working and we can see if we were trying to work in harmony or rebellion against God's actions and purposes.

II

Along with a pervasive belief in the sovereignty of God, there was for Calvin, Knox and many others, a profound belief in sin.

There are so many ways to define "sin". There is certainly great resistance to the subject or even to discussion of sin. One of the ways the Reformers taught us to think of sin is to define sin as the choice of another sovereign for our lives instead of the sovereignty of God. It is like the people on the Exodus choosing to replace God as their God and making an idol, a golden calf as the object of their worship. The calf represented the god Baal.

Whenever we choose to worship someone or something other than God, it is idolatry. It's a rebellion against God. We might choose to worship our self, to worship our career, to worship money, to worship our children, to worship a body type, to worship a life-style and so it goes.

Admittedly the reality of sin has been abused by the Church in a host of ways. It has too often been used to humiliate people. But the doctrine of sin, rightly understood and rightly experienced is not humiliating but is humbling. It leads us to the truth about ourselves and points us to the redeeming mercy and grace of Jesus Christ: the forgiveness of our sins noted in the passage from Revelation.

It was also this belief in the sinfulness of human nature that was useful to people who were working to construct forms of government that were democratic. They believed in the fallibility of human nature. So they believed in the necessity of checks and balances in democratic governments. In an editorial entitled "The Age of Innocence", David Brooks wrote about our unfortunate naivety about human nature and the more honest and humble view shared by many of the people who shaped our form of government.⁸

III

Because they had such a persistent belief in human sinfulness, they had such a powerful conviction about the church or, as it is called in Scotland, the Kirk.

The Kirk was where people could come to be nurtured in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Kirk was the place where people could come to find forgiveness for their sins.

In our passage from Revelation, John declares that as Christ gives us release from our sins he also equips us to be priests together serving God.

The priesthood of all believers was a prominent theme in the Reformation. It was in the Kirk people learned to be priests. It is here we learn and relearn to live in the pastoral care of God and to live with

⁸ Brooks, David, "The Age of Innocence", The New York Times.

the prophetic calling of God. Here is the way Dorothy Day described how she learned to be a priest in the church, in her case, the Roman Catholic church:

I don't act politically on the street or worship in the church in order to fit in with people who are "radical" or people who are "conservative". I read the Bible. I try to pay attention to the life of Jesus Christ, our Lord. I try to follow His example. I stumble all the time, but I try to keep going – along the road He walked for us. I am a Catholic, of course; I belong to the Church, and when I made a decision to join it, I knew my whole life would change. For me, everything is religious – politics and the family and work, they all are part of our obligation: to follow our Lord's way.

IV

"Sovereignty", "Sin" and "Kirk", three words intimately connected. Three words from our heritage and three words about us.