

Sermon: Pantocrator Text: Ephesians 1:11-23 Reign of Christ Sunday
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A lot of cities are defined by a big building that dominates the skyline. Toronto has the CN Tower. London has Big Ben and the Eye. New York has the Empire State Building. Ottawa has the Peace Tower.

It was the same in the ancient world. Rome and its Coliseum. Athens and the Parthenon. And Ephesus, the city Paul writes to in his letter to the Ephesians, had its dominant landmark too, perhaps the greatest of the great 7 wonders of the ancient world.

In the modern day when we think of churches we might think of big buildings that help define a city, maybe even dominating a skyline. London has St. Paul's. Montreal has St Josephs'. And Ephesus, a very large city in its day, had its church too. But its church did not dominate anything. In fact it would have been hard to find. Like all churches in the 1st Century, the church in Ephesus would have met in someone's home. It would not have been a big building but rather a small gathering. Imagine a couple of dozen people gathered around a table in a house in Ephesus, sharing a meal and praying together. That's the church.

And up the alley and around the corner from where this tiny church gathered loomed a huge structure that defined the city: the massive and, in its day, famous temple of Artemis dominated the city of Ephesus.

An ancient writer described the temple, comparing it to the other wonders of his world, in this way: *I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon ... and the statue of Zeus, the hanging gardens of Babylon, and the Colossus of Rhodes, the huge labour of the high pyramids in Egypt, and the vast tomb of Mausolos; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy.*

The temple of Artemis drew pilgrims and tourists from all over the ancient world. It was a huge source of income for the city. It was kind of like the Vatican meets Disney World. It put Ephesus on the map. It made the city wealthy. There was no doubt as to who the big cheese in Ephesus was. It was Artemis Queen of the Hunt.

But... down the road and around the corner, in an alley, in the shadow of the Temple, a small group gathered and read these words: (A modern version of the passage says it this way) *Christ is seated "on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything."* (Ephesians 1:20 -the Message)

Really? How crazy does that sound? In the shadow of a wondrous temple, in a city dominated by a goddess and by the wealth built on her temple, a tiny group proclaims that it is their Jesus

who is really in charge. It is their Jesus who is really a big deal. It's Jesus that the world should listen to, put their trust in and follow...

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. In years past it was called Christ the King. While many of the special liturgical days that we observe through the year ... Pentecost, Easter, Christmas ...have ancient roots, Christ the King Sunday has only been around for a few decades.

Christ the King Sunday had its beginnings in the last century. The head of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius XI first called for a celebration of Christ the King in 1925. Europe at that time was witnessing the rise of great dictatorships. Fascists were rising in Germany and in Spain. Mussolini had begun to rule Italy. The Communists controlled Russia. There were voices that were calling people to war, conquest, genocide and violence in the name of an ideology or nation state. There were forces calling for attention, for allegiance: Militarism. Nationalism. Totalitarianism. Anti-Semitism; all these things cast large shadows. In the midst of all of this, Christ the King Sunday began as an attempt to remind Christians that Jesus is Sovereign. Jesus, in the end, is King. And how crazy would it sound, in the shadow of the great war machines of nations, to say as the Pope did, that Jesus is really in charge. Jesus is the one we should follow.

For the tiny community that gathered in Ephesus, they met in the literal shadow of Artemis' temple. Figuratively they met under the shadow of mighty Rome, its emperor and his legions.

For the people of Europe in the early 20th century, totalitarianism and war were the great threats; the great Imperial Eagle of Nazism threw its shadow over the world.

And today, what shadow falls on us as we gather and read words that say that Jesus is in charge of: "everything from galaxies to governments. And not just for the time being, but forever" What looms over us as we sing that Christ is King, that Jesus is the one who really matters.

A neighbour of mine is from Egypt, a member of the Coptic Christian community. He would tell us that the Copts of Egypt live in the shadow of persecution cast by their own government; at the present time Copts are being persecuted by the military rulers of their country. It is from under this dark shadow that they still proclaim that it is Jesus who is in charge and that it is Jesus that they will follow.

What about for us? What overshadows our part of the world? Closer to home, some in the US would speak of living under the shadow of a financial system that favours the rich at the expense of the poor, a system where people's homes are taken away, in which jobs are made scarce, and where most people are being told to tighten their belts but ...where Wall Street workers make 16% more than they did last year, where corporations sit on 4.8 trillion dollars of profits, where the richest 400 families hold wealth equal to the poorest half of the American people. It's the unfettered market that seems to rule over our neighbours to the south. And what does it mean in that place, under that mighty corporate shadow, to proclaim that Jesus is the one we should follow? We can note that the Occupy Wall Street protestors who were kicked out of Zucotti Park in Manhattan have been taken into the church halls of New York City.

And here? Well for one thing, we live in the shadow of Christmas. Not the celebration of Christ's birth; in the midst of that celebration we can speak of Jesus as being the one that is important. But it's not Jesus who is proclaimed as the one who counts in the shadow of the commercial, material excess, jammed shopping mall and overflowing schedules, stressed out season that is known as Christmas. In the shadow of the commercial celebration what is seen as important? Material things. Shopping. Buying. Money. Stuff.

While under that shadow, from where we are called into debt and exhaustion, let's follow instead the call of Jesus. From under that shadow, where we are told that what we spend and what we buy is what matters, let's listen to Jesus.

The story is told of Mother Theresa who was sitting in one of the gutters of Calcutta, holding an old homeless man, dirty, dishevelled and dying. She was holding him in her arms, wiping his face with her hands, and just cooing gently to him. Two well dressed businessmen happened by and saw her and one of them said to her, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." Mother Theresa looked up into his face and with a twinkle in her eye and replied, "Neither would I"

Christ the King Sunday comes one Sunday before the start of Advent. Advent is meant to be a time to get ready for the celebration of Christ's birth. It's not about buying, spending, getting stressed out, being too busy. It's about doing what seems crazy and impossible in this season. Slowing down. Going deeper. It's about spending time and not about spending money. It's about singing, not shopping. It's about giving rather than buying. It's about recognizing that the one whose birth we will celebrate is the one that really matters.

In our church life we will have opportunity to slow down, to sing, to give, to put Jesus at the center of things.

From under a great and mighty shadow comes a voice: It says." Christ is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." No matter the shadow that looms over us this year, may we know that these words are true.