

Sermon: Not Overshadowed Ephesians 1:11-23 & Matthew 25:31-40 November 20, 2022
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A lot of cities are defined by a big building that dominates their skyline. Toronto has the CN Tower. 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.

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 - Greek goddess of the hunt, daughter of Zeus, twin sister of Apollo - 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 whose Temple defined the city.

But... down the road and around the corner, in an alley, in the shadow of the Temple, a small group gathered to read Paul's letter to them. 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 dozen people gathered around a table in a house in Ephesus, sharing a meal and praying together. That's the church.

Up the alley and around the corner from where this tiny church gathered, loomed a huge structure that defined the city: and in that shadow this tiny gathering 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)

How crazy would that sound? In the shadow of a wondrous temple, in a city dominated by devotion to 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 now, but forever" What looms over us as we sing that Christ is King, that Jesus is the one who really matters.

The shadows of Pope Pious day still loom large. Christian nationalism casts a shadow. It shows its strength in the USA... in Hungary, where the autocratic leader speaks of “Christian values” as something distinct from Christian spirituality and the Christian community... in Brazil, in Russia where the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow calls for Holy War against Ukraine. Christian nationalism is rooted here in Canada too.

Christian Nationalism looks like Christianity. It uses Christian language and symbols and rituals. It marries the political and the religious. It equates faithfulness to political parties, or platforms or positions with faithfulness to God. It confuses loyalty to political leaders with faithfulness to the gospel. It demonizes those who are different, or who do not conform, or who disagree - even if those who disagree are followers of Jesus too.

On this Sunday of Trans Remembrance we might note that Christian Nationalists actively demonize trans people and members of the LGBTQ community, scapegoating them and actively repressing them.

And as Rev William Barber, an African American pastor and civil rights leader wrote recently, Christian nationalists don` t really talk about Jesus.

The Jesus who identifies with the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick or imprisoned, the Jesus of Matthew 25 is not their Jesus. The Jesus who says to turn the other cheek, who says we must forgive 70 times 7, who blessed the meek, who ate with outcasts and those on the margins,

that is not their Jesus. The Jesus who said that the kingdom is within you, that his kingdom is not of this world, that is not their Jesus. The Jesus who said judge not and you will not be judged, love even your enemies and do good to those who persecute you, that is not their Jesus.

Christian nationalism is full of absolutes and certainties. The Jesus of the gospels who asked 307 questions and only gave clear answers to 3 of the 183 he was asked, that is not their Jesus

Their Jesus is white (which is at minimum historically problematic) and seeks political power, strives for dominance, may embrace violence in pursuit of their righteous cause. They are tribal, casting out and attacking those who are not of their tribe. The Militarism, Nationalism, Totalitarianism, and Anti-Semitism of Pope Pius's day is not gone from our world. It can present itself as Christian and overshadow the good news that is the Gospel.

Other shadows that loom over us? This may sound strange at first, but do 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 most important. But it's not Jesus who is proclaimed as the one who counts in the shadow of the commercial, materially excessive, jammed shopping mall and overflowing schedules, stressed out season that is known as Christmas. Material things. Shopping. Buying. Busyness. These cast a big shadow in the season ahead

From under that shadow, can we remember Jesus the King and his identification with those in need?

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 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 shadows that looms over us this year, may we know that these words are true. And may we hear the words of the one seated on a heavenly throne: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Amen