

# St James United Church

## Message for November 24, 2024

### Reign of Christ Sunday (Last Sunday in Church Year)



“Toward Divine Community” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; Mark 13:1-8; excerpt of Jean Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*

As I shared in Learning Together, over the last several weeks we've reflected on community - its role in our lives, how to welcome people into it, how to deepen our experience of it. In this we've reflected on our experience of community, especially in a faith community like this one. Now as we come to the last Sunday of the church year, we conclude this extended reflection and look at what our experience of human community is ultimately directed toward - divine community.

As I say those words, I don't mean heaven, either as a reward for living God's way or a realm to look forward to as an escape from this world. My gaze is directed here, to the world as it can be if we live with God's heart, God's way of peace, compassion, justice and service at the centre of all we do. Divine community is what we mean by Reign of God, traditionally the kingdom of God, what some call the kin-dom of God. The word we are translating in these ways is the *basileia* of God, which in the world Jesus lived in was an empire. Jesus thus spoke of the empire of God in contrast to the Roman empire which was not founded on peace and service but on war and obedience, an expanding, dominating power with Caesar as its sovereign. But Jesus pointed to God as the true sovereign, inviting his followers to practice behaviours that presume we take divine sovereignty, not worldly sovereignty, seriously. We are still to do so.

That's still our call because the *basileia* of God is a process more than a goal, something we seek rather than achieve. This is signified in the beginning of the bible as God sanctifies not a place like a holy mountain or a sacred grove, but time, calling people to set aside one day in seven to rest. The purpose of Sabbath, along with a series of sacred festivals, was to reorient the people to God and the covenant they shared, to consider who they are in relationship to God and each other, God experienced in and through how they treated one another, and beyond that, how they related to other creatures and creation itself. According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel, it wasn't until they forged a golden calf that they were told to construct a shrine. Even then it was initially a tent that went with them, God found wherever they were, very much as Jean Pierre de Caussade suggests in *Abandonment to Divine Providence* that God is present in each moment as we open our hearts to what is before us, as we align ourselves to God, the treasure of God's Reign present wherever we let go of ourselves in love.

This is suggested by Mark when he describes Jesus as sitting at the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple. The Mount of Olives is significant in many ways. It is from there that Jesus entered

into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. It's where the Garden of Gethsemane is located, so where he accepted that he'd lay down his life in love. It is from there that he ascended to God's right hand. In each instance the focus wasn't on clinging to power but laying it down. Yet, as humans we prefer to accrue power, to place ourselves over others. We focus less then on time than space, time used to accrue more space, and build monuments like temples as symbols of power and of control over others. For Jesus the Temple had come to signify that, especially since the priestly council were in authority at the behest of Rome and the needed financial transactions in the Temple were a way to gain power at the expense of the poor. Even its destruction was about power as first Babylonians, then Romans tore it down to show they're the ones in charge.

No wonder Jesus spoke of when not one stone would be on another. But in this I hear not just a reference to the destruction of the second temple, which happened about when Mark's gospel was written, but a call to us to stop misplacing allegiances, to seek a time when we won't need signs of imperial power, but will nurture our relationships, care for the more than human too, and in the process experience divine community, the presence and power of God. It's in this context I hear his warning of coming wars as birth pangs of the age to come. I don't here in this a call to arms, as if we are to impose a Christian theocracy. That's the trap we fell into when the church first aligned with Rome and we created not God's *basileia* but a Christian empire. The result as we tragically know was wars in Christ's name, and sadly in the US election I see an attempt at the same as some churches have aligned with white nationalists to bring about "God's kingdom" with "Christians" restored to power, as if they aren't in power now. We hear it in culture war cries of persecution when people say happy holidays, the Lord's Prayer isn't recited in schools, and those they see as "deviant" simply want to live their lives. But is this what Jesus wants?

The divine community Jesus calls us to embody is not a new theocratic empire. It's an aligning of our hearts to God's way of peace, compassion, justice and service. It doesn't come by force but in prayer. Which again is why God sanctified not a place but time, inviting us once a week to turn off, disengage from the world of work and reorient ourselves toward God, toward each other too, including the other than human, that we may see in others not a way to further our own agendas but simply rejoice that we are all children of God. This for me is why we have faith communities, places to come as we pause in time, places that aren't inherently holy but provide space to celebrate our growth in holiness as we treat each person, and all creation as sacred. As such faith communities orient us toward divine community. But as Jesus said, there will be birth pangs, it won't be painless. It means dying to ourselves in the care we are called to show to others. And it can mean taking risks on behalf of others, especially in these divisive times, standing with women, gender diverse people, migrants, folks in need of income support, those of us who are disabled, vulnerable people like those Jesus stood beside and was condemned for doing so.

Thankfully, we aren't alone in this. Jesus is with us as we lean ever more deeply into the divine community of God's *basileia*. Will we get there? Who knows. It's a process. But it is revealed more and more as we model ourselves after Jesus and eschew power in favour of love. Amen.