

“A Question of Sovereignty”
Sermon by James J. Rawls, 23 November 2008
Christ the King Sunday ~ Annual Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan Service
Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 25:31-46; Matthew 25:31-46
Trinity Episcopal Church, Sonoma, California

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

First, a word of greeting to you, my dear friends of Trinity, and a word of thanks to the Rev. Susan for the opportunity to be with you this morning. It’s good to be here.

I stand before you, as I have in years past, outfitted in traditional Highlander garb, complete with a kilt of the tartan known as Ancient Red Gordon. Like many Scottish clans during the long and fractious history of their native land, the Gordons were divided by a question of sovereignty: Who should rule Scotland? Some supported union with Great Britain, swearing loyalty to the English king, while others were staunch supporters of Scottish independence. The question of sovereignty reached a bloody final resolution during the Rising of 1745 in which the Scottish bid for independence was put down, once and for all, at the decisive battle of Culloden Moor.

With the Scottish insurgency suppressed, the triumphant English monarchy banned the wearing of kilts and tartans (symbols of Scottish independence); outlawed the speaking of Gaelic; and banned, too, the playing of the bagpipes.

There’s a legend from those days of the ban that the clan chiefs still carried small hidden pieces of the old family tartans. At services down at the church—or at the “kirk” as the Scots would have it—the chiefs secretly pinched the tartan between their fingers, remembering kith and kin from the days of old and dreaming still of Scottish independence from England. Here at Trinity, you’ve kept that tradition alive with this annual Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan service, not as a statement of Scottish nationalism but as a commemoration of all our ancestors, be they Scots or English, Irish or Mexican. It’s a time of remembrance and reunion.

This morning I’d like to reflect with you a bit about this question of sovereignty, about who should rule. Sovereignty, by its very nature, is singular and indivisible. A nation has sovereignty...independence and control over its own affairs...or it does not. A ruler either is sovereign...supreme in power, rank, and authority above all others...or he (or she) is not. It’s one of those “either-or” qualities, rather like being unique or being pregnant. Some years ago our daughter Elizabeth was chagrined by the rhetorical impossibility of her selection as the “most unique” student of her senior class. She knew well that she was either unique—one of a kind—or she was not; there are no degrees of uniqueness. Likewise, a young mother-to-be is not more or less pregnant; she’s either expecting or she’s not.

The singular nature of sovereignty is reflected in current political affairs. On the first Tuesday of this month, we voters were presented with a choice of candidates for the

presidency of the United States. Printed on our ballots, above the candidates' names, was the unequivocal instruction: "Vote for One." The singularity of our choice, once made, was subsequently echoed by the president-elect at his first press conference. "The United States has only one government," he said, "and one president at a time." You're either the nation's Commander in Chief or you're not.

It seems to me that we also can read the entire record of scripture in the light of this question of sovereignty. Throughout the Old Testament and the New we find the bold assertion of the sovereignty of God, as the one who is "the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." In the words of the First Commandment, God says simply: "You shall have no other gods before me." Throughout scripture, the nature of God's rule is characterized as that of a loving ruler who cares deeply for God's people, who always seeks the best for them, and who expects the best from them. That's the Gospel truth, the good news. And the people themselves are presented with a choice: they're free either to accept the sovereignty of God in their lives or reject it. The choice is theirs to make, and from that choice flow everlasting consequences in this life and the next.

In each of our lessons this morning, we find intimations of God's sovereignty. From the Prophet Ezekiel, writing six centuries before Christ, we have a portrait of God as a loving good shepherd who cares deeply for the welfare of his flock, seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured. We learn, too, that some bullies in the flock are following not the will of the shepherd but are pursuing their own selfish agenda, pushing with flank and shoulder at their brothers and sisters, butting the weak with their horns. And from their actions flow consequences, for the shepherd intends to strengthen the weak and destroy the strong.

In our reading from Psalm 95, the sovereignty of God is joyfully proclaimed: "the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods." His rule again is characterized as that of a loving shepherd: "we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand." Gratefully acknowledging God's benevolent sovereignty, the people "bow down, and bend the knee, and kneel before the Lord our maker."

The story then continues in our readings this morning from the New Testament. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the sovereign power of God is identified as residing in Jesus Christ, the one whom we acknowledge each Sunday as Lord, "the only Son of God." It is Christ, Paul says, who is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...not only in this age but also in the age to come."

And then, finally, in our reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus identifying himself as the sovereign who shall come again "sitting on the throne of his glory" to judge the people of all nations, separating "one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." The righteous ones who have acknowledged his sovereignty through faithful lives of loving service shall be welcomed into God's kingdom. Those who have rejected that sovereignty, pursuing instead their own selfish agenda and ignoring the needs of others, shall be accursed. "These will go away into eternal punishment," Jesus says, "but the righteous into eternal life." The choice of loyalties...and consequences...is ever ours to make.

I'd like to conclude with the story of one man's struggle with the question of sovereignty. He's someone from the last century who remains an iconic figure in our own times. His name is Clive Staples Lewis. Although raised in a nominally Christian home, C.S. Lewis was an atheist by the time he reached adulthood. Then, when he was in his early thirties, he experienced an epiphany of faith. For sometime, he'd felt a lingering, beckoning spiritual presence, just beyond his consciousness. He came to sense that he could open himself to that presence or continue to reject it. The moment of decision came in the spring of 1929 on a day when he was riding on a double-decker bus to his home outside of Oxford. In his book *Surprised by Joy* (1955), Lewis describes what happened next: "Without words and (I think) without images, a fact about myself was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out.... I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut.... Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew to open the door...meant the incalculable."

So it happened that Lewis made the critical decision to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in his life. The decision came, he said, when at long last: "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed." Two years later, on a little journey with his brother Warnie, his conversion was complete: "When we set out," Lewis recalled, "I did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and when we [arrived], I did."

In later years, Lewis reflected on the consequences of what he regarded as the most importance decision of his life. In his book *The Great Divorce* (1945), he mused on the Biblical images of humanity divided between those who acknowledge the supremacy of God in their lives and those who have enthroned themselves as the Almighty Me. "There are only two kinds of people in the end:" he writes, "those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose [the latter]. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened."

So it is that I stand before you this morning, dressed as a Highlander, not only to share in this wonderful service of commemoration of our beloved kith and kin, but also as a reminder of that essential question of sovereignty that confronts us all. Just as the Gordons two centuries ago had a choice between English or Scottish rule, and as we voters earlier this month faced a choice between a Democratic or Republican presidential candidate, so too each of us has an "either-or" choice of accepting or rejecting God's sovereignty. On this Christ the King Sunday, let us pray: "Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."