

"Christ Our Lord!"

JESUS CHRIST is Lord over all the universe. He is Alpha and Omega--the beginning and end of all things. As the Apostle Paul proclaimed:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord.
[Philippians 2:10,11]

[God] raised [Christ] from the dead, and seated him at [God's] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And [God] has put everything under [Christ's] feet and has made him head over all things.
[Ephesians 1:20-22]

So Paul proclaimed. Thus, as Christians, it was quite appropriate that we began our worship this morning by singing these words:

All hail the power of Jesus' name! Let angels prostrate fall, bring forth the royal diadem and crown him Lord of all...

Yes, the resurrected Christ is Lord o'er all the universe. That is the great gospel and proclamation of our Christian faith! But here's the question which faces all of us: This Christ who rules over the entire universe, is he also the Lord of my life?

This is a very serious question, which each of us must answer in our own heart. Who is Christ the Lord to me?

We say that we are Christians--that we are Christ-followers. We say that we strive to walk in the paths of Christian discipleship--living as Christ taught us to live. But if we do a close examination of ourselves, are those things really true--as true as we proclaim them to be?

Is Jesus Christ--and all that Christ stands for--really at the center of our personal lives? Or, have we put Christ somewhere out on the periphery of our being? Have we really made him, and what he stands for, a lesser priority in our lives? A lesser priority which we turn to only occasionally, as circumstances suit us?

What is at the center of our daily existence? Is it Christian discipleship, or something else?

It's true, of course, that our lives are filled with many things. Over time we all develop a number of personal allegiances--allegiances to which we dedicate various portions of our lives.

For example, most people have an allegiance to their own family and an allegiance to their country.

Many people have an allegiance to their own ethnic/cultural heritage, an allegiance to their profession, and/or an allegiance to their own political party and its particular way of viewing our world.

Some people have a strong personal allegiance to making money, to "getting ahead" in their careers, and/or to accumulating material possessions.

Some people have a personal allegiance to a particular talent they possess, like painting or singing, or to some special interest they have like sailing or gardening.

The list of things to which we humans can dedicate ourselves is immense. But here's the question: in the midst of all our different personal allegiances, where do we put our allegiance to Jesus Christ?

We profess the Christian belief that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. But, in actual practice, do we put him in 3rd or 4th place, or perhaps even lower, in the "pecking order" of our personal commitments?

IN OUR USUAL WAY of thinking and operating, does our devotion to Christ fall somewhere in between our desire to own a brand new car and our desire to find a good book to read? Does our devotion to him fall somewhere in between our personal drive for career success and our desire to see the latest blockbuster movie?

It certainly is tempting to relegate Christ to a lower position on our list of personal allegiances. Many people would gladly settle for such a diminished Christ.

Many people would prefer a domesticated, cut-down-to-size Christ. They would prefer a Christ who demands very little of them, but who is ready to be pulled from their pocket to serve, at a moment's notice, as a kind of "good luck charm" for their lives.

Many people would prefer that. But, in fact, that's not how the Christian faith works. Our faith teaches that Christ is the Lord of all things. Therefore, the challenge falls upon us all, as Christ's people, either to accept him as the undisputed Lord of our lives, or to risk losing his presence in our lives.

YOU MAY RECALL the New Testament story of the wealthy young man who wanted to be Jesus' disciple. As Jesus said, there was only one thing wrong with that young man's life. In essence: the young man's primary allegiance was not to Jesus, but rather to the many possessions the young man owned.

[Mark 10:17-31]

Jesus urged that young man to dispense with that impediment to his discipleship. But, with great sadness, that young man could not bring himself to do it. He could not make Jesus the primary allegiance in his life. Thus, as the *Gospel According to Mark* tells us, Jesus essentially passed him by. The young man was not included in

Jesus' followers.

WHEN PEOPLE are baptized into the Christian faith, it is not just a part of themselves which is baptized. Rather they are baptized completely--body, mind, and spirit. Likewise, when people join a Christian church, they pledge not just a fragment of themselves, but rather their whole being to the discipleship of Christ.

Christ is the Lord of all things. Thus, if we would be his faithful disciples, he belongs at the center of our lives. He deserves to be our primary allegiance, among all the other allegiances--many of them very worthwhile--which lay claim to our hearts.

IMMEDIATELY someone will ask: what about nation and family? For the Christian, must Christ be an even higher priority than those things?

You may have heard the old college motto, which goes: "For God, For Country and For Yale." That's the correct order for Christians. For Christ really is the Lord above all nations--including our own.

During the Civil war, someone asked Abraham Lincoln if he thought God was on the Union side. According to Lincoln, that was not the issue. The issue was whether or not the Union was on God's side! In principle, the Christian's allegiance to God is primary and higher than even the Christian's allegiance to his/her own country.

And, what about family? For most of us, family is an extremely important part of our lives. We cherish our families highly, and dedicate ourselves to their nurture and well-being. Yet, in principle, even allegiance to family comes second, to that higher allegiance which Christians should give to Christ.

In fact, there are people who put family first above all other things. Such people acknowledge no higher power and no higher purpose beyond their own family. Thus, without a higher principle and without conscience, they may feel free to do whatever is necessary to advance their own family, even if it means robbing, cheating, and hurting other people.

According to the Hollywood image at least, the "Mafia" is one notorious example, of such family-above-all-other-things kind of living.

AS FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS we are called to make Christ and his discipleship the primary allegiance of our lives. But that's not where it ends.

For it is our primary allegiance to Christ, which brings enlightenment, enrichment, and higher purpose to all the other worthwhile allegiances we have in our lives.

For the reality is, that with Christ at the center of our lives, we are empowered to become better human beings. For example, with Christ at the center:

--we are empowered to become more loving and caring;
--we are empowered to be more active in doing good works to help others,
--and, we are empowered to be more honest and principled in maintaining

our own personal integrity and in respecting the integrity of others.

In turn, important qualities such as those, enable us to be better members of our family, better citizens of our nation, and better participants in all our worthwhile commitments.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to put Christ first in our lives? It means that we take the ministry, teachings, and spiritual insights of Jesus very seriously. We take them seriously, as truths and goals by which to guide your own lives.

It means that we consciously work at our Christian faith--through prayer and self-reflection, through Bible study, through Christian fellowship, and through giving ourselves in Christian service to help others.

Putting Christ at the center of our lives, doesn't mean that we can always find simple or easy answers, to the problems in our lives or our world. But it does mean this:

With Christ at the center, we are in touch with the very spirit of love which gave rise to our vast universe. Through our devotion to Christ, we come to be aware of the continuing presence and guidance of God in our lives. And we draw strength from that presence and guidance.

We sense God's compassion and God's gifts of grace around us, even when times are tough. Also, with Christ at the center, as we strive to live by our Christian faith, we experience a higher sense of purpose, self-worth, and meaning in our lives, than we've ever known before.

WITH CHRIST at the center of our lives, it's still possible to make mistakes. We can utterly fail to live-up to Christ's example. But even if we do, through real repentance, we can find the assurance, that God truly does love and forgive us. And, with that assurance, we can take up our discipleship anew.

As Christians, we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord o'er all the universe. But here's the question which faces us all: is he also the Lord of my life?

TODAY IS THE FIRST SUNDAY in the season of Lent. Lent symbolizes the 40 days Jesus spent in the Judean wilderness, just prior to beginning his earthly ministry.

As you heard in our scripture reading this morning, that 40 day sojourn in the desert was a formative period in Jesus' life. It was time Jesus

spent, sifting through the various allegiances he could have.

The basic question facing Jesus was this: who would Jesus serve? Would Jesus dedicate his life to God as his primary allegiance? Or would Jesus succumb to the temptation of focusing his life on some lesser allegiance?

Time and again, though in various forms, that basic question challenged Jesus while he was in that wilderness.

With considerable care, and after much thought during those 40 days, Jesus sorted his way through those possible allegiances. And, here are the things Jesus rejected.

--No, Jesus wouldn't turn stones into bread.

--No, Jesus would not fall down and worship the tempter, for the sake of gaining control of the kingdoms of the world.

--And, no, Jesus would not tempt God, by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, in order to stage a great miracle of being saved by God.

We can wonder what other possible allegiances Jesus sorted through in that 40 day period. But repeatedly Jesus' conclusion was the same.

As Jesus resolutely decided: The first allegiance of his life, must always be to God and to the way of life God wanted him to live.

TODAY is the first Sunday in Lent. It's the time when all of us Christians are called into the wilderness, to do some sifting and sorting in our own lives.

Exactly where does Christ and his discipleship fall on the list of your personal allegiances? Is he 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or perhaps even lower?

Ask yourself these questions:

--How closely do you try to live a Christian life?

--And how often, as a matter of faith, do you consciously try to act, as you think Christ would act, in a particular situation?

Jesus Christ is Lord over all the universe. That is the great proclamation of our faith. But, all of us need to be careful, lest our own heart is an exception to that rule.

Christ Our Lord!