

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Reign of Christ, John 18:33-37

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

As The Beatles prepared to release *Abbey Road* on September 26, 1969, John Lennon privately informed his bandmates that he intended to leave the group. “I didn’t instigate the split,” Paul McCartney told the BBC last month, “That was our Johnny ... This was my band, this was my job, this was my life, so I wanted it to continue,” McCartney recalled in anticipation of his 80th birthday [... 80th birthday! ...] next summer.ⁱ

Despite persistent rumors as the decade turned, the formal breakup of the band would not be publicly accomplished until spring of the next year. By that time, of course, the four members’ stardom reached theretofore unknown heights; each had become English royalty, their wealth and their fame affording them a kingdom, collectively and individually.

Perhaps testing the reach of his kingship, then, George Harrison, The Beatles’ lead guitarist, purchased “Friar Park” in January of 1970. The 120-room estate in Oxfordshire, England had been scheduled for demolition by the Roman Catholic Church, which, some fifty years earlier, had received the property as a bequest of Sir Frank Crisp. Repaired and renewed, Friar Park became King Harrison’s castle, and the swiveling stool behind its studio’s sixteen-track control deck became his throne. From that seat, Harrison would produce most of his solo material, including his most critically-acclaimed album, 1974’s *Living in the Material World*, from which Martin Scorsese borrowed the title for his Harrison biopic.ⁱⁱ

Scorsese’s documentary mixes newsreels, concert footage, and family movies with voiceovers of contemporary and archival interviews to depict life in Harrison’s post-Beatle kingdom: at his castle and on the road. Though he clearly approaches his subject sympathetically, Scorsese still presents the difficult contradictions of Harrison’s private and public lives, with the grounds of Friar Park itself serving as a foil, mirroring and exaggerating Harrison’s interior struggles.

Today we celebrate the “Reign of Christ,” the final Sunday of our liturgical year, and we mark this glad occasion with baptism. Appropriate, then, for these end-times of the church calendar, our lessons, our prayers, and our hymnody focus on the fulfillment of time: “the Alpha and the Omega,” announces the appointment from John’s Revelationⁱⁱⁱ ... “Crown him with many crowns,” we sing: crowns of peace and crowns of years, crowns of life and crowns of love.^{iv}

Recall last week's Gospel appointment from Mark – which we anticipated at the beginning of our Stewardship season as an advancing Zombie apocalypse – when Jesus and his friends leave the great Jerusalem Temple, and one of the disciples observes, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”^v To which Jesus responds with unexpected force: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”^{vi}

Surprised and likely frightened, the disciples press Jesus privately about his reaction and prediction, and Jesus shares with Peter, James, and John a vision of “wars and rumors of wars,” of “nation [rising] against nation,” of earthquakes and famines. With what must have felt like cold comfort, he reassures his friends, saying, “Do not be alarmed, this must take place, but the end is still to come.”^{vii}

Setting that dialogue in conversation with today's occasion, we can recognize the disciples' offense of Christ's reign: *Look, Teacher, you will be king of all this! The Temple, this grandest of all human achievement, will be yours – your castle! – and we will be your faithful royalty, Ladies and Lords, Dukes and Duchesses.*

Despite any temporal temptations, Jesus dismisses them: *Kindred, no matter how fine, no matter how grand these buildings are now, they are passing away. See, my kingdom is not of this world, and if you are to follow me, then you must choose your citizenship: either embracing your ambitions for this fleeting place or becoming servant of all and walking to the cross with me.*

As Calvary approaches, this morning's Gospel appointment continues the discussion of God's reign, and Pilate's question of Jesus witnesses the same, worldly misunderstanding as the disciples', only asked from that different angle of his high and powerful seat: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate inquires.^{viii} That is, *are you a threat to me, an insubordinate subject who will cause trouble for Rome?*

Jesus answers unsatisfyingly: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”^{ix}

See, Jesus' reign assumes the *longest view of history* – history viewed from the fulfilled throne of God – a perspective troubling Pilate and confusing the disciples.

In Sir Frank Crisp's time as the keeper of Friar Park, he cultivated extensive gardens and water features. My favorite of these, Crisp inlaid one of the park's ponds with a length of reflective tiles just underneath the surface of the water, so that following an evening of merry-making he could invite his company to the cobblestone bridge spanning the pond, where before his guests he would casually wander to its banks and then walk across the water.^x

That parlor trick can be taken as emblematic of the thirty-four acres' illusory appeal during the season of Harrison's stewardship:

as beautiful as were its gardens, it was along those same lush paths that Harrison's wife, Pattie Boyd, began a romance with Eric Clapton, the man for whom she would leave the castle and its king;

while family photos capture Harrison's son, Dhani, enjoying Friar Park's spectacular floral arrays, pictures from that same season of the mid-1970's show an emaciated and disheveled Harrison smoking a cigarette and despondently surveying his courts;

and, though Harrison championed the needs of the poor – as in his transformational work with Bangladesh – he also indulged a self-referential lifestyle, addled at least as much with cocaine as with compassion.

A conflicted king no matter how sweet his song,^{xi} George Harrison and his subjects suffered for his unsteady rule. He died entirely too young – succumbing to lung cancer at only 58-years-old – living a much quieter life than he had at 28. He spent his last years gardening at Friar Park. Like many of the rich-and-famous before and after him, his extraordinary life is as much cautionary as enviable tale, exposing the high costs and burdens of his chosen kingdom and those crowns that pursued him.

Thankfully, Jesus seeks to save us from a similar fate when he responds to Pilate: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”^{xii}

See, Jesus' living the longest view grants him freedom, even as it calls for his immediate faithfulness. Surveying history from the throne of God's reign sets Jesus free from the breath-by-breath worry about “wars and rumors of wars,” yet requires him to demonstrate great hope and humility, submitting even to crucifixion when other seek his coronation.

While our castles may be more modest than those of rock-n-roll royalty, too often we set our horizons too short and seek the throne that Harrison sought. Too often we bless our pursuit of those privileged seats and rationalize that once we receive our throne and achieve our wealth, we will finally give what God asks us to give: a full tithe, cut neatly from our deeper coffers. Indeed, too often we bless our desire for status by avocational holiness projects and convince ourselves that once we become queen, we will finally have the free time to commit ourselves more completely to the Lord's work.

Trinitarians, let us listen instead to Jesus voice. Let us belong to God's truth, realizing that just as Friar Park witnessed for its keeper, we can *never* become lords of this world ...*we can only become its subjects* ... and in time, its prisoners ... until, finally – *inevitably* – its fools. Blessedly, Jesus' vision of God's reign intends to save us from ourselves and from these hollow pursuits, inviting our constancy in faith, until the complete comes in the very reign of God.

Thanks be to God, by water and the Holy Spirit Christ our King welcomes us as citizens of that new realm, one of and yet beyond this one: where sorrow and pain are no more; where hatred and violence have no authority; where servanthood and mercy and Love are the only powers. Looking forward with hope, our faithful Stewardship – our pledges of time, talent, and treasure, our pledges of heart and bone – can go ahead of us if we will covenant them, charting commitments aspired, even if not, yet, realized and carrying us to those great possibilities God has dreamed for us in the fulfillment of time.

For this life,
and for The Life of the World to Come;
Amen.

ⁱ “[It Was John Who Wanted A Divorce](#).” Vanessa Thorpe. *theguardian.com*. October 10, 2021. ...80th birthday!

ⁱⁱ Scorsese, Martin, director. *George Harrison: Living In The Material World*. Grove Street Pictures. 2011. I draw these details from the Scorsese documentary.

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 1:8.

^{iv} “Crown him with many crowns.” Bridges, Matthew. *Hymnal 1982*, 494.

^v Mark 13:1.

^{vi} Mark 13:2.

^{vii} Mark 13:7,8.

^{viii} John 18:33.

^{ix} John 18:36.

^x Also drawn from the Scorsese documentary.

^{xi} My favorite Beatle ... a really high bar!

^{xii} John 18:37.