



Richmond Hill Reflections

“What Do We Mean by ‘Lord’?” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

August 9, 2020, Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33; “Miami Airport” by Raymond Antrobus

What do you do on staycation? If you’re me, you build a patio. Why not? When we moved in we found a number of old patio stones at the far end of the property and needed a sitting area. There was a catch. Behind the house is a bit wonky so we’d need a frame rather than go directly in the ground. But Glen and I were confident. We put in a sidewalk at our place in Edmonton, plus I’d watched YouTube videos and asked Dan for advice before my holiday. What could go wrong? Plenty. Everything went great at first but as we went along it was clear the stones weren’t going to fit. In a moment of panic, I called Dan to see if he had a wet saw. The only solution I saw was cutting the stones. Luckily the next morning I could see our predicament with new eyes. The frame needed to change, not the stones. With Dan’s help a few days later we finally had a patio.

I offer this not just because I wanted to share what I’ve been up to, but it’s instructive on how I get locked into one way of thinking. Just as I was convinced we did everything right in terms of the frame, the same is true of words, especially churchy ones. We get used to hearing them one way and either hold to that meaning or end up tossing them. But what if we reframe them, look at them with fresh understanding? Over the next few Sundays, it’s my intention to do just that.

Today I’d like to look at “Lord”. In the gospel, Peter twice calls Jesus “Lord”, but we don’t say it much in the United Church. It makes some sense to use male images for Jesus, but we try not to be gender exclusive regarding God. Saying Lord, English for *adonai*, comes from Judaism where *adonai* is used where God’s name is written. This wasn’t lost on Matthew who on one level was connecting God and Jesus. In Psalm 29 God sits enthroned over the sea, and in the gospel Jesus walks on water. Matthew is pointing to Jesus’ relationship with God, emphasising how God is present in and through him. And with Peter joining Jesus on the sea, he was suggesting that God works in and through all of us too. But over time we seem to have lost that sense, gone the other way even, overreaching theologically, people praying to, not through, Jesus, as is the tradition. One concern here is that it shifts our focus to “heaven”. Worship becomes our purpose rather than living out what Jesus taught. The evolution makes sense. You call God Lord, then Jesus Lord, then Jesus God. When you’re done, Jesus is who you pray to. But you lose the nuance of Trinity, the genius of God as divine community calling us into community too. It’s not why we dropped “Lord” but if doing so helps avoid conflating Jesus and God, and losing Trinitarian theology, I’m OK with it.

And yet I’m not when I consider another reason we called Jesus Lord, one more focused on earth than heaven. You see, the words *adon*, *kyrios*, *dominus* were directed to people, not just a deity. If

you watched “Downton Abbey” you’ll recall that the parents were Lord and Lady Grantham. In the UK they have a House of Lords rather than a Senate. The term lord is part of a hierarchy extending back through the Middle Ages and beyond. It was synonymous with Roman society, those higher in status always *dominus* or *domina*. I’m not suggesting that’s good. Social, political and economic injustice were built into the system, especially in the practice of slavery. And as much as we like to think it’s all behind us, we know it isn’t. We hear this in “Miami Airport” by Raymond Antrobus. The poem is a series of questions asked at customs. As you realize he’s not going free even though he doesn’t have drugs, it becomes clear the final question “What did you not hear?” is not just part of one moment but a broader “Don’t you understand how the system works, that as a Black man you’ll always be considered guilty, needing to be kept under heel?”

This way of seeing the world is how Greco-Roman civilization worked and its ruler, Caesar, was Lord. But Jesus came to help us reframe how the world works. To assert “Jesus is Lord” is to say “Caesar is not”, that the way of Jesus - his teaching of compassion, inclusion, sharing with one another, as we heard last week, is how it works in God’s reign. Like the disciples told to tend to the needs of the people, we respond by living this out, seeking a just, equitable world, where no one is presumed guilty because of skin colour, no one asserts one race, gender, orientation, body type, culture, etc. is the norm. It means reframing how we see the world, our place in it, and others’ too. I saw a meme with Lisa Simpson on stage. It reads: “Black Lives Matter isn’t anti-white. Feminism isn’t anti-men. Gay pride isn’t anti-straight. It isn’t about you.” That captures how we get past the status quo of prejudice and privilege. And saying Jesus is Lord affirms our fealty to that.

Though we proclaim fealty, the world seems set and people are forcing others to fit the frame. How else was the meaning of “Jesus is Lord” so easily lost, racism continuing long after the abolition of slavery, women still struggling for equality, the environment threatened, people in Beirut asserting government corruption is the true cause of the explosion, commentators sharing their fear the US president intends to stay in office no matter November’s results? But I still have hope. Why? Because when Jesus questioned Peter’s doubt, he was saying that Peter was caught between two ways of seeing the world, which means Peter saw what was possible. And so can we. It is why people keep struggling for equality, tackle climate change, take to the streets of Portland, Toronto, Beirut, raise the alarm of political overreach. They haven’t given up. That is what it means to me to affirm Jesus as Lord. He comes to the disciples in the last watch, the darkest point of the storm when they are far from shore. He comes to remind them and us it is always the darkest right before dawn.

Ironically, if my affirming Jesus is Lord means all that I just said, we need to be cautious using the word. “Lord” is still gender exclusive, denotes “master” to a slave, affirms hierarchy, all the realities of the status quo Jesus challenged. Perhaps I shouldn’t use a word with such baggage. But it is still in traditional prayers, we sing it in hymns. So when I read or sing it, I will affirm the vision of Jesus, committing to live out the justice, compassion and love God wants for us. Perhaps you will too. Amen.