

Reign of Christ Sunday (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46)

God has put "all things under his feet." Shouldn't we be worried about such a portrayal of absolute power?

by [Martha Moore-Keish](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

One recent morning, as I was preparing breakfast, my trusty radio companion Steve Inskeep caught my attention with a story on the success rate of nonviolent civil resistance movements. Researchers Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan looked at more than 300 cases around the world from 1900 to 2006, concluding that nonviolent resistance movements are twice as likely to succeed in achieving social, political, and economic change as movements that resort to violence. *Twice as likely.*

To be sure, nonviolent movements do not always accomplish their purposes. Libya and Syria have witnessed the rise of violent resistance movements in the wake of nonviolent efforts in the past few years. This research shows, however, that nonviolent movements are, on the whole, much more effective at bringing about lasting change—as happened in India in 1948 and Tunisia in 2011. These movements need time, and organization, and people power—admittedly not an easy combination to achieve. With these in place, however, nonviolent movements work.

“Civil resistance does not succeed because it melts the hearts of dictators and secret police,” Chenoweth and Stephan write in *Foreign Affairs* (July/August):

It succeeds because it is more likely than armed struggle to attract a larger and more diverse base of participants and impose unsustainable costs on a regime. No single civil resistance campaign is the same, but the ones that work all have three things in common: they enjoy mass participation, they produce regime defections, and they employ flexible tactics.

Since hearing this story, what's stuck with me is the testimony to the power of mass participation in protest against a powerful regime. This has also complicated my reading of the lectionary passages for the Sunday we now call "Reign of Christ" (formerly known as "Christ the King"). This is the day when we celebrate Christ in glory, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named," according to Ephesians. On this day we extol Christ's reign (or regime?) and praise the way that God has put "all things under his feet."

Shouldn't we be worried about such a portrayal of absolute power? Don't we know how easy it is for Christ's power to be claimed by—and then confused with—very human political powers, serving corrupt and partisan interests?

I heard a story recently about a minister who presided over all the church session meetings wearing a crown. Perhaps this was intended as humor, but the effect was to claim power for herself—power that she exercised in dismissing several staff members and sowing discontent among members of the congregation. If Christ's crown of glory in any way authorizes our own crowns of political power, perhaps it is time to rise up in resistance to all such celebrations of Christ as imperial ruler over all.

Matthew 25 and Ezekiel 34 are beginning to persuade me that there is another way. Matthew, like Ephesians, offers us a portrait of the glorified Christ on a throne in heaven with all the nations gathered before him. Mighty and unopposed, Christ sits on the throne, surrounded by angels, and sorts the sheep from the goats, assigning to each one her eternal fate of punishment or life. The crucial point (shared by Ezekiel's vision) is that divine judgment is directed at the powerful who have mistreated the vulnerable and weak. The one who judges, the one whom God places in power (both David and Christ), is the one who identifies not with earthly rulers but with the lost and the least.

With whom does Christ the king identify? Or—to ask the question another way—whom does Christ *represent* in his exercise of power?

In Matthew 25, the answer is very clear: Christ identifies with the "least of these," those who are "hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison." The God of Jesus Christ does not identify with the big dogs—or the big sheep of Ezekiel. This God comes precisely to judge the oppressive powers of this world and to set up a new regime in their place. Real power, then—the power that Ephesians is talking

about—is not the power of domination, but the power of resistance to “all rule and authority and power and dominion” that usually prevails in our world. Christ’s reign challenges the powers that we see displayed in political corruption, in despotic rule, in the ordinary tyranny of the privileged over those who scramble to make a living in our economy.

Christ, the one who “fills all in all,” may be precisely the one who empowers people with hope to stand against false rulers and unjust powers. Our resistance is not resistance to the reign of Christ but resistance *with and because of* the reign of Christ. Christ in glory promises that even when the prospects for peace and justice seem dim, God’s commitment to the “least of these” is sure and will finally prevail.