

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 25, 2019

Proper 16, Year C:
Isaiah 58:9b-14
Psalm 103:1-8
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

The Transcendental Supremacy of Christ

I have it on good authority that in a month or so a feature-length movie of the PBS show *Downton Abbey* will be released. No doubt this gladdens the heart of many an anglophile. “A soap opera in pretty smocks” was how I heard it described one time. Mostly I liked the parts where they showed church, which might not surprise you. It was interesting to see what worship from the old Book of Common Prayer and the King James Version of the Bible was like.

There is of course a certain romanticizing of the English class system in *Downton Abbey*, but that’s okay, given that romance is the order of the day with the show. It is exotic for an American to see the kowtowing to the aristocratic family: Lord this and Lady that. We don’t have the same kind of formal kowtowing, at least not in principle. In general, we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, like not having to curtsy and say “my lady,” and that kind of thing.

Whether we’re English or American, though, the issue of lordship and authority is one that comes up many times in Scripture. In today’s gospel, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Does he have the authority to interpret the law in that way? Elsewhere Jesus describes himself as “lord of the Sabbath,” a dramatic claim that causes some consternation among the religious authorities, as you might imagine it would.

The epistle to the Hebrews is also about the lordship of Christ. We don’t know a whole lot about the Epistle to the Hebrews: we don’t know who wrote it, or to whom in particular it was sent. But we can tell that it also has to do with issues of Christ’s authority. And an overarching theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the transcendental supremacy of Christ over all things, over all people.

The author makes this point relative to a few different things: the angels aren’t higher than Christ, he says first, neither are the prophets, or the patriarchs in the Hebrew scriptures, or any others that have come before, or will come after. Christ is the head of all things, of all people.

Certainly, the author does not denigrate anyone who came before. On the contrary, especially in our readings for the last couple weeks, he lauds them for their faithfulness. Over and over he talks about the faith of the characters in the Old Testament: both the people you’d expect—Abraham and Moses and so forth—as well as some of the lesser characters—Rahab, for example. Their faith is something that the readers are told to emulate. They are the great crowd of witnesses that is cheering on the present-day followers of Christ.

But they aren’t Jesus. Jesus isn’t just another character in the story, even the best character of the story. He is the object of those characters’ faith. He is the one they were looking for; he is the one that their faith was in.

Such is the faith of the Church: that the person Jesus Christ, son of Mary, descendent of Abraham, is God himself, the promised Messiah of Israel, whose story is inseparable from theirs.

The faith of the Church: that Jesus Christ is Lord of all; that he was at the beginning of history, is in the midst of history now, and will be at history's end. He is the Lord whom we worship, whom we serve, to whom we give thanks. God from God, light from light, true God from true God. The person, Jesus of Nazareth, incarnate God, is Lord.

So say the Scriptures, and so say the creeds, and so say most of the preachers most of the time. But, we might ask, how does Christ's "transcendental supremacy" play out in our day-to-day life?

One of the things that Christ's transcendental supremacy means is that, if Christ is Lord then no one else is, and nothing else is. So, for example, Lord Grantham can go around saying that he is the lord of Downton, and that's true, in a certain sense. But the Christian says: well, kind of. The lord of here, maybe, but you're not the Lord, Lord. An such is true of any authority. A king can claim a monopoly on authority; to which the Christian says: sort of. A slavemaster can claim total ownership of another person (I've been thinking about slavery because of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slave ship to America, which holds these truths to be self-evident...), but the slave him- and herself says: not totally. Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

The supremacy of Christ relativizes all other sources of authority. Human authority isn't bad; some would say that we need authority to flourish as human beings. Hierarchy itself isn't bad. Human authority just isn't supreme. Only Christ is supreme.

If you're a person in power, that is something important to remember. If you're a person in power, you should know that your power is limited, it isn't absolute. If you're a person not in power, then Christ's lordship is something important to remember. Those presently in power are not the ultimate authorities. Because Jesus Christ is Lord.

The result of this is that Christians will always be in their culture, but not of it. Properly ordered governance is good, and obeying legitimate earthly authorities is good. But if and when the mores or laws of a culture or society say one thing, and their Lord says another, then the disciples must be the disciples of their Lord.

For example: if a culture says it's okay for us to forget about the poor (because they should work harder) or those in prison (because they're guilty of something), the Christian has to disagree. "We can't forget about the poor," the Christian might say. "It's right there in the book... Jesus himself said it, and Jesus Christ is Lord."

And on the other hand: if a person is poor, and the world is telling him that he doesn't matter, that he should just work harder, then he knows that that is not true. The Jesus who is Lord holds each and every person to be of infinite worth. And if Jesus says that is true, then it is true, and it should be a great comfort. The point here is that, for the Christian, Christ's Lordship relativizes all other claims to authority, including our own.

However, the issue of Christians who hold the transcendental supremacy of Christ within a culture or society that does not hold that to be true is a sensitive one. Because, if Christ is lord of all, and Lord Grantham is not, and Parliament or Congress is not, then Christ is transcendentally supreme over all over claims to godhood as well, and religious authorities universally. Christ is not only an ethical teacher or an eternal principle, but God himself, who created all things, sustains them in being, and one day will bring them home. That is not true of anyone else, other gods, other prophets, other religious figures. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then all religions are not the same, and all religious figures are not the same. What's more: Jesus Christ is their Lord, too. There are important differences and they can't be elided.

So how does the Church, the body of Christ, keep from a kind of triumphalism? To put it bluntly, how do Christians keep from being a bunch of jerks?

We do it by studying the work of the Lord himself, who—though he is "transcendentally supreme"—lowered himself to be subservient to the entire human race. Our model of lordship is

not Lord Grantham, but the one who knelt to wash his disciples' feet, who reached out to the poor and marginalized (even against his friends' advice), who went to his death for the benefit of a human race that did not love him (especially against his friends' advice). As St. Paul says, "While we were yet enemies of God, Christ died for the ungodly." Christ died for those who did not love Christ. The Church is to serve those who do not love the Church.

For the Christian, this is what lordship looks like, a recognition that the first will be last and the last, first. Rather than being triumphalist, the Church shows its participation in Christ's triumph by forgiving her enemies, serving those in need, lowering herself to be servant of all. The triumph of Christ is when he is dying on the cross. And such self-sacrifice is the Church's vocation as well.

This is a tricky balance of confidence, on the one hand, and humility, on the other. The temptations of either being jerks about Christian uniqueness, or dismissing Christian uniqueness completely, are understandable, but they are temptations that must be resisted. Have confidence that Christ is alive, and he reigns with transcendental supremacy over the entire world—this world and the world to come. Have humility because that lordship is not like any other. It is a lordship of perfect love, a lordship of sacrifice.

Last thing: I'm taking the phrase "the transcendental supremacy of Christ" from a man named Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, who was a Biblical scholar and, for many years, rector of the St. John's Episcopal Church in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania. In addition to his commentary on Hebrews¹ and some other books, he also wrote a masterful commentary on the book of Revelation.² It was his last book. The story I heard from someone who knew him is that he worked on the Revelation commentary for many years, sent it in to his publisher, and received the page proofs back. He reviewed the page proofs one day, marked them up, and put them in the mail to send back to his publisher. Then he went outside to cut the grass. There, he had a heart attack and died.

I like to think that after having written this commentary on Revelation, an expression of his evangelical faith in the lordship of Christ, he in short order got to find out if he was right about it. That doesn't always happen in theology. In short order, he got to find out if he was right.

The Church believes in the transcendental supremacy of Christ: it is our faith. It is the source of our courage and our joy. It gives us confidence and humility. It is the promise that we have been made by the one who keeps his promises. And, one day, we'll be able to find out if we're right.

¹ *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977).

² *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1990).