

Dylan, solidarity and the reign of Christ

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

November 13, 2013

A week from Sunday, on the Feast of the Reign of Christ, [Holy Covenant UMC in Chicago](#)—where I work part time as a musician—is holding its second annual service spotlighting the music of Bob Dylan. ([Not calling it a Dylancharist.](#)) If you're in Chicago the evening of 11/24, [come out and join us](#).

Below is the piece I wrote for the church newsletter.

A year ago, I was [planning the music for Holy Covenant's first Bob Dylan-themed service](#). I wanted to do the service on the Feast of the Reign of Christ, because the day's themes—the call for bold moral vision, the struggle between justice and oppression, the hope for a better future—loom large in Dylan's music.

But while the music fit the occasion well, I ended up wrestling with a basic question: who's the "we" here? If we're going to sing these first-person deliverance songs, who's seeking deliverance? We, the members and friends of a majority-white, relatively privileged American congregation? Or someone else?

What does it mean for non-prisoners to sing "I Shall Be Released"—especially if we're complicit in prison-like conditions at Bangladeshi garment factories, or in the literal incarceration of Americans? Is the hard rain of justice a'gonna fall on our behalf, or *on us*? Maybe we should be singing in the third person instead.

A word from Methodist theologian Justo González helped me puzzle through this. He points out that if you want to talk about justice at a predominantly middle-class church, you need to avoid focusing on guilt. *We have it so good, and other people have it so much worse! We could probably right this wrong if we wanted to, but we haven't done it yet, so we probably aren't going to and we should feel bad about that, too.* Notice the one-two punch: the assumption of our own power, and the acceptance of the status quo anyway. Guilt doesn't mobilize.

Instead, says González, middle-class churches need to focus on solidarity. This requires naming not our relative power but our relative lack of it: we may be more powerful than some people, but we are unable to simply overturn the oppressive systems that keep them on the margins. This power is bigger than us. It's what Christians call sin—not in the Sunday school sense of discrete bad things we've done, but in the cosmic sense of a power that enslaves us. To begin to resist this, we have to name not just our privilege but its limits: the lack of power that puts us in the same boat as those who exist on the margins of our communities.

In short, we have to accept that deliverance is for us, too. Because real justice doesn't come from acknowledging how much better we have it than those other people. It comes from casting our lot with them, from embracing what we have in common: we can't change the world on our own. We need one another, and we need the reign of Christ to come among us, to challenge the reign of the oppressive powers of this world.

Dylan has long understood solidarity. He chose to perform one of his most stridently us-vs.-them songs at the March on Washington, 50 years ago this summer:

Why sing that as a white man at a civil rights rally? Dylan might plausibly have been seen as one of the privileged “foes” at whom “We’ll shout from the bow, ‘Your days are numbered.’” But white participation in the March on Washington wasn't about guilt; it was about solidarity—and solidarity is about “we.”

Dylan illustrates the point more starkly in his song “Only a Pawn in Their Game”:

It's a protest song over the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers—but it doesn't blame Evers' killer. It blames the whole power system that convinced him to see Evers as the enemy, to protect what little he had by hating someone with even less. The solution to this isn't just to replace hate with guilt. It's to name the real bad guy—the power that profits from hate—and to act in solidarity against it.

The reign of Christ is about solidarity, too. We can't overturn the world's unjust powers; for that we need the only one whose power is even greater. What we can do is stand in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, proclaiming Christ's authority and anticipating Christ's reign. And we can bear witness by singing—not just about our own experience but about all who await the hour when the ship comes in.