



Christ the King Sunday (A)

Born to Be King

[RCL] Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

It would be more appropriate to call this gloriously named Sunday “Christ the Shepherd Sunday” rather than Christ the King. The Old Testament lesson certainly gives us that impression, staying with the shepherd metaphor in vivid and dramatic language, focusing on God as the Great Shepherd, a description and promise eventually leading to a human shepherd, David. He became and then evolved into the best-known and loved king of ancient Israel. His name became a symbol of a great king, but he was not a saintly king – not with his many wives, dysfunctional children, and constant, unending wars.

The New Testament lesson, by contrast, paints a picture of a glorified Christ raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God “in the heavenly places.” The word “king” does not enter in this narrative, even though the language of the passage is filled with power beyond that of kings and emperors. Paul’s own epistles don’t use the appellation “king,” which is found only in 1 Timothy, but that was likely written much later than the time of Paul. Of course, the book of Revelation is filled with kingly images, as is to be expected from apocalyptic writing. It is nearly impossible for those of us steeped in the melodies and glorious sounds of Handel’s *Messiah* to think of Revelation without hearing the triumphant words from Psalm 24:

Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in.
“Who is this King of glory?”
“The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.”

This rather militaristic triumphalism is missing from the gospels, however. So, how did this image of Christ the King come about?

We first encounter the title “king” in Matthew’s lovely story of the Magi’s visit to the infant Jesus. The wise visitors, accustomed to the great potentates of the East, come looking for a child born to be “king of the Jews,” but Herod, a once-great but troubled man, is already the king of the Jews by order of the occupying Romans. He did a great deal of good for Israel, but now he is old, having killed his wives and his own

children in order to hold on to his throne. When he hears of the purpose of the Magi's visit, he is terrified. Who is this child born to be king? The image he leaves to us of what a king ought to be is a rather miserable one.

In Matthew's gospel, a child is called king of the Jews, and no one in his immediate family seems very surprised while the Magi recount ancient prophecies. The myth of David's succession runs strong through the ages of Hebrew history and hope. Yet, that same title will be used thirty-three years later, written on a tablet with a vicious, ironic intention, a tablet nailed on top of the cross where the child, now a grown man, is hanging between two thieves. In the starkest language, we have the story of the greatest tragedy, one not easily conceived by the human mind.

What did the grown Jesus, the wise teacher and most appealing prophet, do with the title "king"? He used it in his parables. In his stories, we don't have triumphant kings glorious in battle; we are given examples of kings who make difficult decisions based on justice; kings who give banquets where everyone is invited; and finally we are presented with this magisterial image of a king who bestows apocalyptic justice in Matthew 25. This parable, called the Great Judgment, is so familiar to all those who understand what it means to serve others in the name of Jesus that it has become almost a cliché in our times. Here, the image of the king is one of unwavering justice. This is a tough parable, without sentimentality, without evasions. We hear no trumpet calls and no triumphalism. Here, *humility* reigns.

All the teachings of Jesus find a culmination in this parable. The one who taught that "the last shall be first" presents the king as bringing to his right hand, a position of honor, those who have lived a life that honored others above their own selfish needs. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." This king invites into the heavenly realm those who paid attention to the poor by giving them clothes to wear and food to eat. This king opens his kingdom to those who saw human injustice and took the time to visit the ones who were imprisoned unjustly; this king praises those who welcomed the stranger and the migrant by offering them hospitality and shelter. And they did it all, not knowing that in the process of feeding, clothing, and welcoming, they were responding to the Giver of all good things: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This is a radically different image of a king for those who were listening to Jesus in the first century – and for those of us who, while no longer living under kings, know what it is to live under the leadership of persons who promote greed and selfishness instead of compassion and humility. This Jesus ate with the poor and the outcasts and honored women while elevating the worth of little children. This Jesus, this king, does not appear holding a sword but instead hangs on a bloodied cross.

In many churches, Christ the King Sunday is filled with the sound of trumpets and with hymns of extravagant praise, accompanied by images of gold and precious jewels. The contrast with the life of Jesus jars and troubles us. It becomes easier to accept this disharmony when we realize that this Sunday is a very late addition to the church's liturgical calendar; Pope Pius XI instituted it in 1925.

Almost twenty years later, the brilliant Anglican writer and theologian Dorothy L. Sayers examined the question of the kingship of Jesus in her marvelous series of radio plays called *The Man Born to Be King*. When the Magi visit Mary and Joseph and the baby to offer gifts of great value, Mary wonders about what it all means. One of them tells her: “I speak for a sorrowful people—for the ignorant and the poor. We rise up to labor and lie down to sleep and night is only a pause between one burden and another. Fear is our daily companion—the fear of want, the fear of war, the fear of cruel death and of still more cruel life. But all this we could bear if we knew that we did not suffer in vain; that God was beside us in the struggle, sharing the miseries of His own world.”

The Son of Man, as Jesus referred to himself, proved through his own death that he is beside us in the struggle, sharing our suffering and our miseries. At a time of a rampant virus, in a climate of fear and even hatred, this realization gives us comfort and hope, for Jesus, who rules with love, is the kind of king we can also love.

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