

Jesus as King

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, November 20, 2022

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Luke 23:33-43

Traditionally, this Sunday is known as Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. It is always celebrated on the last Sunday of the Church Year, the last Sunday before Advent. And so today's gospel reading looks at the question of Jesus' kingship.

Even before he was born, Jesus was referred to as one who would be king. In the very first chapter of Luke's gospel, we hear the Annunciation from the angel Gabriel to Mary: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

After Jesus is born, Matthew's gospel tells us that "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"

On Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus sitting on a colt and riding from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, Luke recounts that "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice . . . saying 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

And after Jesus is arrested he is brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, where the chief priests and elders accuse Jesus of being a subversive (perverting their nation, fomenting revolt). They testified that Jesus told people not to pay taxes to the emperor, a seditious act. And they said he claimed to be the Messiah, a king, thereby posing a direct challenge to Roman rule. Pilate asks Jesus

directly: "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus responds: "You say so."

In the end, at the urging of the crowds, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified, something only the state had the authority to do. Jesus was hung on a cross to die an agonizing death. Roman soldiers mocked him, saying "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" But one of the criminals crucified with Jesus acknowledged his kingship, saying "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

At a crucifixion, it was the Roman custom to display a sign stating the victim's crime. In Jesus' case, the sign read "This is the King of the Jews." Jesus was crucified for the political crime of high treason. He was considered a dangerous criminal, a traitor to the Roman empire. Accordingly, he died a criminal's death.

Many people are uncomfortable with the image of Jesus as King not only because it is an exclusively male image, but because it is an image with so much baggage attached to it. It has too many negative connotations. It's patriarchal and authoritarian. It makes one think of the imposition of unjust laws -- edicts from on high. It makes one think of rich royals living in castles off the backs of poor peasant farmers. It makes one think of involuntary servitude, of taxation without representation. Indeed, the image of Jesus as King ought to be especially unpopular in our country, given that we fought a war of independence against our king.

We no longer live in a monarchy. We are no longer subject to kings or queens. So, instead of speaking of Jesus (or Christ) as King, it might be more appropriate in this day and age to speak of Jesus Christ as our Governor or as our President, our Commander-in-Chief. Of course, all those images have problems of their own.

What is important, I think, is not the specific label of King or Governor or President, but what is behind such images. What truth about Christ is trying to be conveyed through such images? I believe that to speak of Christ as King is to affirm that he is our leader, our highest authority. Christ is head of the Church and sovereign of the universe. He is the one to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance.

But more than that, Jesus Christ is a different kind of king, who doesn't fit our usual stereotypes. He is a king who acts as a shepherd. Jesus is a "shepherd king" who cares for us and nurtures us. He is the one from whom we seek guidance and protection. He is the one who searches for us when we are lost, frightened, and alone, and who carries us back in his arms to return us to the fold. He is the one who sustains our lives.

Christ is a different kind of king altogether – a king without armies or armadas, a king whose strength rests not in weapons of war but in the power of love and truth. Christ is a nonviolent king who urges us to stand up to evil and injustice, to overcome the oppression and violence of others, but without resorting to violence and oppression ourselves.

He does not remain seated on his throne, ruling from on high. He does not stay holed up in his castle, separated from his people by a wide moat and high castle walls. He does not live in opulence while his people starve. Rather, he ventures out beyond the castle gate to be among his people. He seeks out the poorest of the poor and lives in solidarity with them. Christ is a king who identifies with the poor, the needy, the outcast. Christ is a pauper king, the one who is present in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. Christ is our king -- but a different kind of king -- a shepherd king, a pauper king.

His reign stood in direct opposition to the Roman Empire. Jesus of Nazareth, and John the Baptist before him, were both killed by the Empire, because they challenged the status quo. They threatened the established order. But they began a movement for personal transformation and social change that would live on in their disciples.

Early Christians understood this. When they proclaimed Christ to be their King, that meant Caesar was not their King! When they said that Jesus Christ was their Lord and Savior, that meant Caesar was not their Lord and Savior! When they spoke of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, that meant Caesar was not the Son of God. To be a Christian in the first, second, and third centuries was to be a subversive in the eyes of Rome.

Consequently, early Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire. Some were even martyred for their faith. But hard as it tried, the Empire was not able to destroy the Church. Christian churches kept growing throughout the Roman Empire. So, the Roman Empire ended up co-opting the Church. At the beginning of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, putting a halt to Roman persecution of Christians. He became a great promoter of the Christian Church and was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Decades later Christianity would become the official, established religion of the Roman Empire.

Some say this was the worst thing that ever happened to Christianity, because it meant the Church became a tool of empire, blessing imperial ambitions. As European empires expanded, they did so with the blessing of the Church, through the Doctrine of Discovery, or what we might more accurately term, the Doctrine of Domination. That doctrine was the Church's stamp of approval on explorers and conquistadors conquering lands and peoples with Christian missionaries at their side.

In the past decade or two, however, biblical scholars and church historians have begun to critique the cozy relationship the Church has had with empires since the end of the fourth century. They advocate a return to the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, which were critical of empire. Instead of the Church giving its blessing to systems of domination, exploitation, violence, and oppression, they say, the Church ought to be a champion of God's domination-free order of justice, nonviolence, and liberation.

Jesus Christ is a king like no other. He is our king to the extent that we give him our ultimate allegiance. He is our king when we make him the ruler of our hearts. He is our king when we seek his guidance in all that we do. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.