

Sermon for Last Sunday after Pentecost Year C

Christ the King

[RCL] Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

When you think of a king what image immediately comes to mind? A man wearing a crown and regal clothing? Perhaps someone who is powerful living in a royal palace?

In the time of Jesus, the ruling monarch of Rome had absolute power on earth and was worshipped as a son of the gods. Any challenge to Caesar's authority would be dealt with quickly and efficiently. In ancient Israel the king was not only the head of state, but also served in the role as a type of high priest. Israeli kings were often considered messianic figures sent by Yahweh to deliver the nation from those who sought to oppress them.

The Jews of Jesus' time continued to long for the day that a messiah would come and deliver them from their oppressors and restore the fortunes of Israel. First Century Jewish messianism was wrought with dreams of military victory over their Roman occupiers, the expulsion of all Gentiles from the Holy Land, and a newly established nation of Israel founded upon biblical principles. It is no wonder that the Roman overlords and King Herod, their vassal king, viewed potential usurpers with extreme caution.

It is into this political turmoil and heightened apocalyptic fervor that Jesus was born – and crucified. Jesus, a poor carpenter and itinerate preacher from a small town, could hardly be confused with being a king. Yet for a brief moment, his followers dared to dream that he may indeed have been the long-awaited messiah.

There was nothing regal about him at all. His rag-tag group of followers were from the lowest classes of society. He attracted Samaritans, lepers, demoniacs, tax collectors, fishermen, women of ill repute, the poor, and those marginalized by the ruling class of religious leaders. At best, Jesus could easily be confused with the many other zealots and rabble rousers that appeared on the scene during Rome's occupation of Palestine. Adding more irony to the situation is the fact that Jesus' parentage was questionable due to the fact that Mary became pregnant before marrying Joseph. Everything Jesus owned he wore, down to his worn-out sandals.

Under Pontius Pilot, the Roman governor stationed in Jerusalem, Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion, a form of punishment reserved for the lowest classes of criminals and traitors. It was the most ignominious form of capital punishment. The sign on the cross proclaiming Jesus as "This is the King of the Jews" was not honorific, but was meant as a joke and an insult. Simply put, it labeled Jesus as a mere traitor and reminder to future rebels what awaited them if they resisted the Roman Empire.

Jesus hung with criminals on the outskirts of Jerusalem, naked and bleeding from his wounds, a pitiful sight meant to instill fear among the Jewish population. To the average person, Jesus was no king, but a man whose life and ministry was cut short. But Jesus' journey to kingship begins on the Cross in accordance with God's will for humanity.

The Church has done a disservice through the generations in the manner in which it has proclaimed Jesus as King of Kings. Early religious artwork portraying our Lord shows him dressed in the simple clothing of his time, but as the Episcopate became temporal rulers, and the Church gained status in the eyes of emperors and kings, the image of Christ began to take on a more grandiose look. He was portrayed wearing the regal robes of rulers and potentates. By doing so, secular rulers used the image of King Jesus to justify their own dynastic rule – ones that were often despotic and cruel.

The Church became complicit in supporting these secular rulers, and Church rulers often were just as powerful and cruel in their own right. As the Church amassed great armies, King Jesus became a warrior king, leading his faithful troops into battle against the infidels. Jesus, the King of Kings, was no longer a simple poor itinerate rabbi from Palestine who took mercy on the poor and outcast, and submitted to death on the cross, but he now took on the look of European monarchs – white, wealthy, dressed in flowing robes, and wearing a jeweled diadem. Sadly, this is a far cry from who Jesus truly is and the message he proclaimed that resulted in his crucifixion.

Jesus' journey to kingship was no easy endeavor. Our Lord had to learn humility through obedience to God's will – obedience even unto death on a cross. Jesus is no ordinary king who rules over his subjects with absolute authority and power. He is the Suffering Messiah, one who came into the world and dwelt among humanity, being tempted in all things without sin.

Jesus earned his kingship by first becoming a servant of all. "If you want to become great," he taught his disciples, "you must first become a servant." Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, washed his disciples' feet, fed the hungry, took pity on those who suffered, ate with sinners, forgave sins, spoke out against injustice, challenged the status quo, welcomed the social outcasts, and took on the mantle of poverty and obscurity. Although he existed in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but became human and lived among those deemed unworthy and marginalized by society.

If we profess Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, do we then live as his subjects? Is Jesus' kingship just an honorific we bestow upon him without allowing him to have any real influence on the day-to-day actions in our lives, or do we really live as if he is our sovereign – seeking his will in all aspects of our lives? If Jesus who is King and Lord identified with the least in this world, are we willing to also identify with the least as well?

Jesus was not elevated to king status in order for us to dress him in regal roles and place him far above humanity. Rather, his kingdom is not of this world. The least in this world are considered the greatest in his kingdom.

Our king is no ordinary king. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. God has put all things under subjection to his Christ who is under God so that God may be all in all. Glory to Christ the King who through sacrifice and humility has shown us the way to God. Amen!

Written by The Rev. Timothy G. Warren. Warren is the founder and pastor of St. Francis Independent Old Catholic Church, an emergent outreach ministry in California's High Desert Region, and President/CEO of LifeSkills Development, a nonprofit dedicated to providing assistance to at-risk young adults.

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