

Is He the One?

Sermon for November 24, 2019
Christ the King Sunday
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*Behold, the days are surely coming,
when I will raise up for the house of David
a righteous Branch, who will reign as king and deal wisely,
and who will execute justice and righteousness in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.
And this is the name by which the King will be called:
'The LORD is our righteousness.'
Jeremiah 23:5-6*

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

Today we are observing a Festival called the Reign of Christ, or Christ the King. With this festival we have come to the end of ordinary time and also to the end of the liturgical year. As the year concludes we give thanks for all that has been, and for the good we were permitted to give and to receive.

But what are we celebrating today? What does it mean to call Christ a king? And in what way is he a king?

The history of Israel has produced a long list of famous prophets, but not a very long list of famous kings. Prophets, I can name by the dozen: Samuel and Nathan; Elijah and Elisha; Jonah, Amos, and Hosea; Isaiah, Micah, and Zephania; Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel; Zachariah and Malachi; and many more.

The list of famous kings is much shorter: King Saul, King David, and King Solomon. Not that there were no other kings in Israel, but most kings were not great leaders, and some were actually quite terrible.

King Saul was the very first King of Israel. He united the 12 tribes under one unified rule, and, as you can imagine, this did not go down easily. King Saul was a very troubled king, some even say he went insane under all the pressure.

Then came King David, beloved King David, a gifted ruler and a smart politician. He established Jerusalem as the capital, he built the first royal palace, and he established the royal court system with all the bureaucracy that such a court system usually requires. King David expanded the kingdom a great deal; he did that by going to battle and also by marrying the daughters of other kings.

Then came King Solomon. He was famous for his wisdom and for the splendor of his court. King Solomon built the first temple, which became the pride and joy of Israel.

After King Solomon things went downhill quickly. The sons of King Solomon fought among themselves, and the kingdom split into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom; never in the whole history of Israel, did it recover from this split.

Then both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom had a series of ineffective and corrupt leaders. Look at our first lesson today: it is a lament over the fate of the Southern Kingdom and a condemnation of their careless rulers who are compared to irresponsible shepherds.

*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter
the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.
Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel,
concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people:
It is you who have scattered my flock,
and have driven them away,
and you have not attended to them.
So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.
(Jeremiah 23:1-2)*

Before long, foreign powers came and invaded and conquered Israel: first the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Syrians, and then the Southern Kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians. To the utter shock of the people, the Babylonians destroyed not only the City of Jerusalem but worse, they destroyed the Holy Temple, the House of God. And then they captured the elite, the priests and the rulers, and the upper class, and relocated them into Babylon where they lived in exile for several generations.

Afterward, empire after empire swept over Israel. The Babylonians were followed by the Persians and then the Greeks and then the Romans.

But throughout all this time, the people of Israel never lost the hope that one day God would send another great king, a king just like King David, only greater; and the kingdom would be established again, and would flourish again, and Israel would be great again.

Look again at our first reading for today. In this reading God says:

*Behold, the days are surely coming,
when I will raise up for the house of David
a righteous Branch, who will reign as king and deal wisely,
and who will execute justice and righteousness in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.
And this is the name by which the King will be called:
'The LORD is our righteousness.'
(Jeremiah 23:5-6)*

And then came Jesus. Was he the promised righteous king? Was he the king that people had been praying for? A king like David, only greater? Was he the one? People's opinions were very

much divided.

And so, 2000 years later, on this Sunday called Christ the King Sunday, we get to visit this same question once more: Is Jesus a king? And if so what kind of king is he? And what does it even mean to call Jesus a king?

Before I say more about this, I want to quickly return to the list of famous monarchs--King Saul, King David, King Solomon--because I also want to name a few queens, just to round out the picture. (I can't stand it if we only talk about men and never about women).

One of the more famous queens was Queen Jezebel. Her name is often associated with cruelty, greed, and vanity. Jezebel was the daughter of a Palestinian ruler, and King Ahab had married her to form a political alliance with that nation. Once Jezebel assumed her role as queen of the Northern Kingdom, she began to promote the pagan worship in which she was raised. Before long it came to a bloody show-down between her pagan priests and the priests of Israel. In the end the priests of Israel prevailed, and Jezebel was thrown out of the window and fell to her death. She went down in history as the most wicked queen of Israel, but sometimes I think there was perhaps more to it, and history is always told by the winners.

And then there was Queen Esther, beloved Queen Esther; her story reads like a Jewish Cinderella story. Queen Esther was Jewish, but she did not live in Israel. She lived in Persia, in the home of her uncle Mordecai, and for a long time they kept their Jewish identity hidden. One day she was brought before the King of Persia and the king was so enchanted by her beauty that he made her his queen. During her time as queen it was discovered that there was a secret plot to slaughter all the Jewish people in the land. Queen Esther used her influence as queen to save their lives and to kill their enemies. In this way she became a great hero to the Jewish people and in the Jewish tradition she is remembered each year with a special holiday, the Purim Festival. The Purim Festival is a fun and playful Spring festival with special food and costumes and dress-up parties for children.

Now, whenever I tell the story of Esther, I feel very much compelled to tell the story of Queen Vashti as well. Queen Vashti was the queen before Esther. She was a Persian queen, and as such she does not really belong in this list of Jewish monarchs. But her story is in the Bible and it is one of the great and often overlooked treasures.

As I said, Queen Vashti was the queen before Esther. It is said that Queen Vashti was a very beautiful woman, and her husband, the King of Persia, loved to show her off. One day, her husband held a grand banquet at the palace, a banquet that went on for days, and all the men got very drunk, including the King himself. And in this drunken stupor he ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to come out and show herself to the men unveiled, which was the same as ordering her to come out naked. And Queen Vashti said no. She refused to be paraded in front of all these drunken men. The King was so enraged that he had her executed. It had to be done, supposedly, because other women might get inspired by her example of self-respect.

So now that we have expanded our list of monarchs, and have included a few queens as well, let me return to the question of the day: Was Jesus the long awaited king--the king which Israel had

been praying for?

Some said: No way! They were deeply disappointed by Jesus, and they took offense at the idea that he was sent by God as new King David. And some said: Yes. He is the one. It is a surprise, but yes. But if so, then in what way did Jesus fill the role of the long-awaited King? And what could it mean for us today to call Jesus our King?

Historically, when people speak about a king, a ruler, an emperor, it has to do with power and with the ability to make things happen. And this power is often accompanied by symbols and rituals. One of the greatest symbolic rituals is a king or a queen sitting on a throne inside a majestic palace.

Think about movies that you have seen or palaces that you have encountered in your travels. If you are a Star Wars fan, you might recall the famous the throne room scene when Luke Skywalker and his helpers receive medals for their bravery (all of it accompanied by celebratory music with lots of trumpets). Or if you have ever traveled to St. Petersburg and have seen the Winter Palace you might recall the throne room of that palace. Or perhaps you have been to Beijing and visited the Forbidden City in which case you might have seen another famous throne room.

And even if you have never traveled to such places, perhaps you can in your mind imagine such a room, a splendid and ornate room, dominated by a throne and on the throne a king or queen who issues orders or bestows favors.

And now, look at today's gospel: What we have in today's gospel is also a throne room scene! But what a throne room scene it is! It is completely upside down and all expressions and symbols of power are reversed.

The royal palace is replaced by a hill, a notorious hill outside walls of the City of Jerusalem: It is a hill that has a strange stone formation which strongly resembles a skull, and so this hill has become known as "The Skull"--Golgolet in Hebrew, Golgatha in Greek. And on top of this stone formation there is a cross, an instrument of torture, and this cross serves as the throne, the throne from which Jesus rules.

In the place of attendants there are two more crosses with two criminals. There are soldiers gambling for the clothes of the king, there are people standing by and watching, there are leaders scoffing and mocking the king, and on top of the throne there is an inscription that says: "This is the king of the Jews".

Really? The king of the Jews? Where is the power of King Saul? Where is the glory of King David? Where is the splendor of King Solomon? And was not the promised king supposed to be even greater than David?

Being nailed to a cross does not look like a very royal endeavor. At most, there might be a faint echo of rebellious Queen Vashti and other heroes like her who dared to defy those in power.

And yet, like any monarch who issues decrees from his throne, so too, does Jesus issue two decrees from the cross. The first one is made to God: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' With this Jesus asks for forgiveness for all who are torturing him

and all who are killing him. In the middle of their cruelty he asks that they be forgiven! He asks for forgiveness for the whole world, for those who actively plotted his death, and those who stood by and let it happen.

The second address is to one of the criminals crucified along with Jesus. The criminal requested: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom;' and Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Now, if you look at this Jesus on the cross who gave his life in pursuit of justice, who spent his last moments asking that his tormentors be forgiven, who opened paradise for a criminal, what do you see? Is this an image of weakness or of power?

This is a question that matters greatly, and here is why: We live life on two levels, one is the surface level and one is the heart level.

On the surface level, we deal with the thousand daily details: run errands, make appointments for the vet, see the dentist, buy groceries, wash the kitchen floor.

On the heart level we have to deal with the big stuff: Resolve inner conflicts, forgive when we have been hurt; carry grief; respond to injustice; resist evil; practice compassion; see the goodness in others; live with hope. And it matters--it matters greatly—whether at our core we have a sense of resilience or defeat.

If we say Jesus is our King, if Jesus rules our heart, then it matters what kind of rule this is. Is our heart ruled by a defeated victim or by supreme love?

And in what way does this inform our own sense of power? Do we feel we empowered to resist evil? Can we make choices like Queen Vashti? Can we act with the power that each of us has, the power to choose truth and justice, to choose forgiveness, to embrace life that is really life?

My prayer for you at this end of the church year is that you may be feel both strong and peaceful, and secure in God's never ending love.

Amen.