

KING JESUS

LUKE 23:33-43; COLOSSIANS 1:11-20
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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This week, many churches around the world celebrate "Christ the King" Sunday. This is a relatively recent phenomenon—the Roman Catholic Church only instituted this Sunday in 1925, and Protestant churches gradually began to adopt it at various points.

So, it's not a Sunday that has deep history in the Christian tradition, like Pentecost or Easter or Christmas or anything like that.

But it is kind of hinge week between the liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time and Advent, a Sunday when we pause to reflect on the nature of Christ's kingship before going back to the beginning with the season of Advent and then anticipation of the Christ child.

So, I was thinking this week about kings and kingdoms and how we think about both.

I want to begin with the words of a commentator named Debie Thomas that I came across this week because they reflect my own thoughts almost exactly:

I'm still a novice when it comes to the nuances of the liturgical calendar, so when I turned to the lectionary this week, I expected to find passages that sound, well, kingly. Something glorious from the Book of Revelation, perhaps, about Jesus on his heavenly throne, decked out in fancy robes and a jeweled crown. Or maybe something grand and prophetic from Isaiah: "A son will be given to us, and the government will rest upon his shoulders." Or at least a shiny moment from one of the Gospels: Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism, heaven thundering in his ears.

Perhaps Thomas was saying that she expected Scriptures that would reflect images of this sort of king.

[*image*]

But Thomas goes on:

But no. I found none of those. What I found is a crucifixion scene. A stripped and suffocating man, wracked with pain I cannot fathom. A crowd of mockers spewing hatred at his naked body. A man hanging between thieves, derision in his ears, speaking blessing and promise to one less fortunate than himself.

Can we pause for a moment and contemplate the paradox? This is our king. This is our king.¹

It's easy for us to forget, I think, how utterly radical this is. Particularly for those of us who have been walking with Jesus for a long time. The cross and the suffering king become kind of like the furniture of the room we call Christianity.

Yes, of course Jesus suffered and died. Yes, of course there was a cross involved. We wear them around our necks, we decorate our worship spaces with them, and all the while we forget the reality they point to.

And so, perhaps we need to consider other images of Christ our king.

Like this.

Or this one called *Easter, 1985*, by the west coast indigenous artist Roy Henry Vickers.

Or this one.

Each of these is a depiction of a different kind of king with a different kind of crown.

¹ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1180>

I think it's important to note that images like these do not just capture the unfortunate part of the story where Jesus dies. These images depict something crucial about the very nature of our king and of his kingdom.

They represent the culmination and trajectory of an entire life and teaching

This morning, I went back near the beginning of the story, in Matthew 5, to spend some time in the Sermon on the Mount. I paused on the Beatitudes.

I considered these well known "Blessed are's" in light of the images that I knew I would be putting on the screen this morning. Each one, it seems to me, finds expression or reaches its fulfillment on the cross:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus had nothing on the cross. No possessions, no esteem... his friends had betrayed him. His people, the Jews, had dragged him before Rome as their chosen scapegoat. His last words, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" echoing David's anguished Psalm 22.... Yes, Jesus was poor in spirit.

*Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

What was Gethsemane if not Jesus mourning for the road he would soon be taking?

*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

Repeatedly, Jesus had refused to defend himself when he had every right to. He had resisted the violence of Peter in the garden; he had not taken Pilate's bait when under interrogation. He was, all in all, frustratingly silent and submissive when we would have loved a display of roaring and righteous indignation.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

Everything about Jesus' journey to the cross and his final execution came about as a result of his determination to embody the righteousness of God on behalf of those who would not or could not do so...

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

Among Jesus' last recorded utterances were words of forgiveness to the very people who were driving the nails into his hands and feet, and mercy to a dying criminal at his side.

*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

Pilate famously tried to freed Jesus' from the mob's demand for blood. *What crime has he committed?* The Roman centurion's words after Jesus' breathes his last and the temple curtain is split in two could sum it up. *Surely, he was the Son of God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*

Jesus preached the peaceable kingdom throughout his time on earth. And in his death, he brought peace. The apostle Paul, several decades after this scene, puts it like this in our second reading today:

[T]hrough him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

The cross was, of course, the ultimate in persecution—a means of torture exquisitely cruel and public, a death designed to reassert Rome's muscle and to publicly shame all who would rise up against her.

Jesus' died with insults and lies and "all kinds of evil" ringing in his ears. *Save yourself! Come on Jesus! What kind of king are you anyway?*

And of course, the inscription over his head—THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS."

One last bit of irony and insult for all those present. Some king, they must have thought as they looked at the broken body on a cross reserved for the most shameful and despised.

Some king.

Now, of course we know that the cross wasn't the end of the story. We know that without the empty tomb three days later, Jesus' death would have just been another death. One more notch on Rome's belt; one more failed Jewish Messiah.

And yes, we gladly confess that it is through the cross that Jesus wins a real *victory* over the forces of darkness and evil.

But can we pause with this image? *This* is our king. This is how his kingdom comes.

I don't think that the suffering of Christ is a means to an end—a way to reconcile nasty sinners to God, the crown of thorns a regrettable precursor for the jeweled crown he will wear as he reigns in the celestial heavens.

The Jesus we see in images like the ones on the screen this morning isn't an interruption in the life of God; it is the same Jesus who reigns at the right hand of God.

So often Christians treat the cross as kind of the moment where God does the grim business of working out an abstracted atonement theology on our behalf rather than as the moment when we are brought face to face with the very character and nature of God and the depth of his **love**, his **desire** to be reconciled with his creation, and of his **mercy**.

This isn't the bad part of the story before Jesus can get on to the business of ruling like other kings.

On the cross, I think we see most clearly who God is and how God loves us to the end. This is our king.

This is, to use the exalted language of our second reading this morning, the “image of the invisible God,” the “firstborn of all creation,” the one “in whom and for whom all things were created,” the “head of the body, the church,” the “firstborn from the dead,” and the “one in whom all things are held together.”

As Christians, we don’t take our earthly conceptions of what kings and kingdoms are like—riches, power, luxury, jewels and crowns—and then squeeze Jesus into these; rather, we allow who Jesus was and how Jesus lived and loved and died to reshape our understanding of the king we need and the kingdom that we are a part of and will one day come in fullness.

This is good news in a world that is still addicted to toxic conceptions of how kings and kingdoms are supposed to work.

This is good news for a church that is often so easily tempted to default to assumptions about power and control that bear little resemblance to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And this is good news in light of what we are going to be doing in a moment, remembering loved ones we have loved and lost.

The criminal on the cross speaks three words to Jesus on the cross within which I think could fit all human hope and desire and longing.

Jesus, remember me.

We don’t know what this man had done throughout his life; we don’t even know why he was hanging there with Jesus. We can imagine that his life was no paragon of virtue, but we don’t know.

And yet those three words. *Jesus remember me*. These were enough. Because our king is merciful.

In a few moments, we will be remembering people dear to us who are no longer with us. And we do so in the hope and the confidence that the king that we serve, the king that we bend the knee to in reverence and admiration and love, *remembers* us.

Our king has walked the road of suffering and loss, pain and death before us.

But our king has not only walked the road, he has emerged out the other side, defeating evil, conquering death, and bringing reconciliation and peace.

Because of what God has done in Christ—because of how God has *lived* and *loved* in Christ, because of how God reigns and remembers in Christ—we do not grieve as those who have no hope; we are reminded that while death still stings, it is never the last word in God’s story or in ours.

This is good news. This is the best news.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

