

# The Alpha and the Omega

John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, many churches around the world celebrate “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday. One commentator I read this week called it the “liturgical hinge between the long “Season After Pentecost,” and the beginning of Advent.”

It’s a space in the Christian calendar to reflect on the meaning of Christ’s reign over the Church, the world, and our own lives.

It’s a space to ask important questions: What kind of king is Jesus? What does his rule look like? What does it mean to live and thrive under his kingship?

And our church has also historically used this Sunday to reflect upon what Christ’s kingship means for our relationship to death, specifically the deaths of those we have loved and lost, but also on our own inevitable deaths.

There are a number of ways to approach this topic, but I thought I would do it in three parts. I want to talk about how the world views Christ as king, how God views Christ as king. And then I want to close by reflecting upon how a king like Christ helps us as we think about death and about those we have lost.

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So, how does the world respond to Christ as king?

In John 18, we are dropped into the last day of Jesus’ earthly life. Jesus is before Pilate. The Jewish leaders have trumped up charges against him. Pilate demands an answer to a simple question: *Are you a king?*

Jesus himself expresses ambivalence about the title. *You say that I am a king.*

He's not just being elusive. Behind his words is an implicit acknowledgment. Jesus knows that he doesn't fit accepted categories of kings and kingdoms.

He was born in humble surroundings and came from humble stock. Yes, king David was in his lineage, but so was the prostitute Rahab and an Edomite woman Ruth. His adopted father was a simple carpenter.

He rejected wealth, which is fairly un-kingly. Spoke of the love of it as the root of all evil, actually. Hard to fund a kingdom that way, but that's the way he operated.

He set aside the prerogatives of power. Didn't seem to crave it. Certainly didn't use it as a way of fortifying his own status and security. Even flat out rejected it in the wilderness. Most kings are deal-makers. Not this one.

He talked a lot about the lowly being lifted up and the proud and the arrogant brought down.

He spoke the truth. Said that he had been born to testify to the truth. That he was Truth in person. He had not mastered, and did not *care* to master, the political "art" of using vague words to obscure the truth and say very little of substance or value. Jesus probably would have been terrible on TV.

He cared little about his own popularity. He actually told people not to talk about the good things he was doing. Political suicide, that.

He talked about his kingdom in strange ways. He compared it to mustard seeds, to a farmer who went out to sow, to yeast rising, to a treasure hidden in a field, to a fisherman's net. These are not particularly regal images.

And then, of course, after this scene with Pilate, we know that he died. Despised, humiliated, decisively rejected. Like a common criminal. There's nothing terribly kingly about not fighting back and defending the interests of your people.

Jesus wasn't the kind of king that most people of that day wanted. The Jewish religious leaders rejected him because he equated himself with God. The Romans rejected him because he was disruptive and inconvenient, a threat to public order. And the people rejected him because he wasn't the conquering king they hoped he would be.

All of this goes way back to 1 Samuel. Israel's prophet had grown old and he appointed to take over. The problem was, his sons were corrupt.

<sup>4</sup> So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah.<sup>5</sup> They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; **now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.**”

<sup>6</sup> But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. <sup>7</sup> And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; **it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.**”

Israel’s first king was a concession to the people who wanted a king like everyone else.

Israel got what they asked for—a king like the other nations. Israel’s subsequent history with kings was a depressing one.

There are a few good exceptions here and there, but it seems like each successive king in the OT is trying to outdo the previous one when it came to ineptitude, greed, and the flagrant misuse of power.

Right from the beginning, God told Samuel that the people’s desire for a human king was a rejection of God, their true king. Kings were a bad idea, it seems, a flawed institution right from the start.

God alone is king. And when God shows up as Israel’s *last* king, we see that people still preferred kings like the nations.

### **So, what did/does the world think of Jesus as king?**

The short answer is, not much.

Jesus is not a king like the nations. And so, just like all the way back in 1 Samuel, the people want little to do with him.

Our hunger for an earthly king equals a rejection of God as king.

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What does God think of Christ as king? He is called the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

### *Images*

Revelation 1:4-8 gives us about as exalted a list of descriptors as you can imagine:

- The faithful witness

- Firstborn of the dead
- Ruler of the kings of the earth
- The Almighty
- The one who loves us
- The one who frees us
- The one who made us a kingdom of priests
- The one who is, who was, and is to come
- The Alpha and the Omega

This same Jesus who was rejected as un-kingly by the world, is described as the source and goal of all creation. The one that human beings nailed to a cross in a final refusal of the way that leads to peace, is shown to be the King of all kings.

All of this is because the king that the world rejected was raised from the dead, thereby validating his kingdom and elevating him as the true king—the ruler of the kings of the earth.

This is most clearly described in Philippians 2:6-11:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
 did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing  
 by taking the very nature of a servant,  
 being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
 he humbled himself  
 by becoming obedient to death—  
 even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
 and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.

Christians, at our best, proclaim that it is *this* king and his kingdom that will have no end.

And it's important to note that the servant Jesus, the humble Jesus who proclaimed peace and the forgiveness of enemies was not just a temporary Jesus who will revert to behaving just like every other king once he gets finished with his saving work on the cross.

It's not as though once Jesus gets through with all of his preaching and teaching and loving and healing and dying and rising, he will assume a throne and begin to rule with an iron fist just like every other king.

I think many Christians implicitly believe that when the kingdom of God finally comes in fullness, Jesus will rule more or less like every other king. There will be no more forgiving enemies or turning the other cheek or seventy times seven. Now it will be time to flex the muscle and settle the score.

This is the view of Christ as King that has fueled all kinds of violence throughout history, pretty much from the time of Constantine up to the present. Jesus is recast as a king like all the other kings, a king who blesses the empire's agenda.

But it is not what Scripture teaches. And it is not what our king has shown us. Christ as king redefines what kingship looks like and he teaches us to long for something better than "a king like the other nations."

Christ rules as king now and will rule as king in the future in the same way that Christ revealed God while on earth. The one who is, who was and who is to come does not change.

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Here at LMC we often celebrate memorial Sunday on the same day as Christ the king Sunday.

What does all of this talk of kings and kingdoms have to say to us as we remember our dead? What does it say to us as we contemplate our own mortality?

Quite simply, the one who is Alpha and Omega, first, last and everything in between can be trusted with *our* beginnings, our endings, and everything in between.

Death is painful. Death is a thief and an enemy. Death robs us of those who have been integral part of our lives.

Death hurts because we love.

There's a marvelous passage in Colossians that says two important things about Christ our king.

- In him all things hold together (v. 17)
- Through him all things are reconciled (v. 20)

Christ our king is the one who holds together and reconciles all things, even death.

Even the many beginnings and endings and in between times that characterize our lives. Even our failures and our frustrations, our victories and our deepest hopes.

Even our regrets in the face of death, even the things left unsaid and undone, even the pain of a loved one's absence.

*In him all things hold together.*

All of this is held together by the one who **loves us**.

We must never, *ever* forget that our king is, first and foremost, the lover of our souls.

All of the biblical metaphors for Christ—lion, lamb, shepherd, rock, father, son...—each and every one of them is grounded in the anchor and foundation of the entire Christian faith.

God is love.

And it is the love of God that can be trusted to hold us through all of the endings that we must walk through.

In Dale Allison's book *Night Comes*, he talks about one of the final scenes in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy:

After Gollum and the great ring of fire fall into the fires of Mount Doom, Frodo and Sam sit on a little ashen hill. As lava rises around them, Frodo speaks the obvious: "An end comes. We have only a little time to wait now. We're lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape." The two friends then slip into unconsciousness. But that's not the end. The eagles come, and the hobbits are borne away to safety. Later, when Sam awakens and sees Gandalf, he gasps: "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?"

There must be some analogue to this scene in the universal human story. If not, then the cosmos is finally apathetic, and death can separate us from the love of God; and if that's so, then love doesn't endure all things but finally fails. Which cannot be.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian hope is that because Christ is our king, because Christ has redefined what kingship looks like, and because Christ has invited us to participate in the kingdom that has come and will come in fullness, that everything sad is, indeed, going to come untrue.

The love of God which endures all things, which always protects, hopes, and perseveres, which loves each one of us to our ends, cannot fail.

Death cannot separate us from God, if God is the king Jesus shows him to be.

Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. But the Christian hope has always been that he is not the last.

This is good news. This is the very best news.

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 17-18.