

The Reconciling King

Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, many churches around the world celebrate “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday.

It’s a relatively recent addition to many church’s calendars. The Roman Catholic Church only instituted this Sunday in 1925, and Protestant churches gradually began to adopt it at various points since.

So, it’s not a Sunday in the same category as Pentecost or Easter or Christmas or anything like that.

Actually, Christ the King Sunday has a bit of an interesting history.

It was instituted by Pope Pius XI who, it seems, was trying to cozy up to the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. It was meant to combat a growing anti-clericalism in society and the eroding influence and power of the Church.

So, at least *initially*, Christ the King Sunday seems to have been instituted as a means toward the end of helping the church retain or *regain* political power.

Rather inauspicious beginnings, I would say.

Indeed, I read a few commentators this week who said that we should ignore the day and avoid “Christ the King” language because the word “king” had been so corrupted throughout history.

I see their point. And yet we cannot escape the language of Christ as King in Scripture. And I would always prefer to rehabilitate corrupted words than get rid of them.

So, today I want to reflect on Christ as king.

What kind of king is Jesus? What does his rule look like? What does it mean to live under his kingship?

And, on this day which Mennonite churches have often called “Eternity” or Memorial” Sunday, what does it mean to think about death and remember our loved ones in light of his kingship?

This morning, I want to anchor my reflections on what it means to call Christ “king” around two sets of images.

As you may know, last month I spent ten days on a European vacation. It was mostly just a chance to reconnect with friends and see a few soccer games, but we managed to take in a few of the sites along the way as well.

And even when I’m on vacation, I can’t help but pay attention to the where and how Jesus shows up.

We began our trip in Spain where we visited the Royal Palace of Madrid. [*image*]

Construction on this impressive structure created to house the Spanish Royal Family began in 1738 and took nearly two decades to build.

Beside it is the Almudena Cathedral. [*image*]

This is a relatively recent construction, beginning in 1879 and continuing off and on for much of the twentieth century.

These two magnificent structures are across a courtyard from one another. Together they symbolize what has been a reality for much of Christian history: a tight connection between the state and the church.

The priest and the king, side by side, not always friends, necessarily, but certainly aware of the usefulness of the other in keeping hold of wealth and power.

This is an image of Jesus from inside the Almudena Cathedral. [*image of royal Jesus*]

What do we notice about how Jesus is portrayed here?

- Purple robe (royalty)
- Jewels
- Ornate crown
- Face looks almost stoic, regal

Well, after a few days in Spain, we traveled to Germany to spend time with a friend there. One day, we decided to visit the Dachau concentration camp just outside Munich. *[image]*

For twelve years, this was the site of almost unspeakable horrors. Forced labour, starvation, brutal violence. This was where the Nazis sent first political dissidents, then undesirables of all kinds (Jews, priests, sexual minorities, and many others).

This was where prisoners were greeted with the ominous words over the gate to the camp: *Arbeit macht frei*. "Work sets you free." *[image]*

There were several chapels set up on the outer edges of what once the camp. There was a Jewish chapel, and Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox chapels as well.

In the Protestant chapel, there was an opportunity to light a candle and ponder another image of Jesus. *[image of Jesus in Dachau]*

What do we notice about how Jesus is portrayed here?

- Nothing colourful, ornate, or elaborate; black
- Emaciated
- Suffering
- Face etched with sorrow

How we understand Jesus depends a lot on where we're looking from, doesn't it?

We've heard two passages of Scripture this morning.

The first is an exalted portrayal of Christ from Colossians 1.

The image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, the one through whom and for whom all things were created, who holds all things together.

For many, this scripture would fit well with the first set of images. A royal king who stands over everything.

Yet Paul makes it very clear *how* Jesus' kingship was attained. The end of the passage from Colossians points us straight to the one from Luke.

[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** (Col. 1:11).

Jesus' kingship is attained through suffering. His exalted status comes by way of solidarity with the lowly, the weak, the victim.

His crown is not an ornate symbol of power and wealth, but a crude symbol of mocking irony fashioned by his enemies.

Jesus is executed by the very powers that later church leaders have spent millennia trying to cozy up to, whether in seventeenth century Spain or in our modern world where Christians of all stripes, left and right, believe that the realm of politics is the means by which God's will is done and God's kingdom will come.

Jesus' kingship is the final word on what God thinks of kings.

All of this goes way back to the days of Samuel. Israel's prophet had grown old and he appointed to take over. The problem was, his sons were corrupt. In 1 Samuel 8:4-7, we read:

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. 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.**"

But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. 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.

And 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.

Kings were a bad idea, a flawed institution right from the start.

Right from the beginning, God told Samuel that the people's desire for a human king was a rejection of God, their true king.

God alone is king.

And when God shows up as Israel's *last* king, we see that people still preferred kings like all the other nations.

The cross of Calvary shows us this quite starkly.

So, when I think of Christ as king, I think of the image from Dachau, not the image from Spain.

This is our king. This is how his kingdom comes.

The suffering of Christ is not 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 one from Dachau 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, the depth of his love and mercy, his desire to be reconciled with his creation.

This isn't the bad part of the story that has to happen 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. We see a suffering king, a rejected king, a reconciling king.

In Samuel's warning to the people of Israel about what "a king like the other nations" will actually be like, we hear a constant refrain: "He will take..." Sons, daughters, crops, taxes... the taking will never end!

Christ as king doesn't take. He gives. He gives his very self to us, to the world.

So, 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 which 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 not exactly a model of virtue, but we don't know.

And yet... those three words. *Jesus remember me.*

These were enough. Because Christ our king is merciful. And because Christ our king is the one through whom God is pleased to reconcile *all things* to himself.

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 to whom we bend the knee 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.

It is because of what God has done in Christ that 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 our king.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

