

Christ the King Sunday  
November 20, 2022  
Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 18:1-8

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Being ruled by a king has always seemed to me a cruel, authoritarian remnant of a world that belongs in the past. When I think of kings, I think of extravagant lifestyles and extravagant building projects funded by oppressive taxes levied on the lower classes. I think of massive egos that require lots of bowing and scraping before them. Because kings seem to be the complete opposite of Jesus, I've never really warmed up to the idea of applying the concept of kingship to Christ. Until this year. And I'd like to share with you what changed my mind, not just about applying the concept of kingship to Christ, but calling Christ my king.

Maybe we can imagine it this way: the Christian tradition has passed down to us a variety of tools for building a life that is rooted in God's vision for the human family made whole. These tools are words and images and stories that help us trust the grace and forgiveness that God reveals in Jesus, and then follow Jesus in his way of compassion, forgiveness, humility and generosity. These words and images and stories come to us from a culture that is very different from our own. We might not know what to do with some of these tools, and some of them have been rather abused by the generations that have gone before us. I think that's especially true with the image of Christ as king. Since the time of Constantine, the church has supported—in the name of Christ—the actions of any number of kings that include everything from war to colonial oppression to genocide. Not to mention that there are now Christian Nationalists in the US who want to impose their fundamentalist Christianity on everyone, making Christ, in effect, our national king. It might make you wonder whether the image of Christ as king is salvageable at all.

However, what helped me decide that the image of kingship is not only salvageable, but truly valuable, was getting a new glimpse of what the earliest Christians meant by it, and experiencing it as a tremendously potent way of affirming everything I believe is most true and most important about Jesus. It's a powerful way of asserting that Jesus was much more than a teacher or healer, and even death on the cross was not a defeat for his way of compassion and forgiveness. I wonder if our three scripture readings today can help you imagine a kind of kingship that doesn't look anything at all like any typical monarch or emperor. I'd like to invite you to join me for a quick dive into our three readings because I think each of them holds an important piece of the picture, and together they can help us recognize how Jesus turns kingship completely upside down so that we want to embrace Jesus as our ruler and king.

Our first reading comes from the chaotic period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, condemns the kings of Judah whose self-serving rule paved the way for the destruction of the nation. They were like shepherds who destroyed and scattered the flock that was placed in their care. Jeremiah says ominously that, since the kings had not attended to the people in their care, God would be attending to them.

But God also promises to raise up a ruler for God's people who will care for them the way God wants, a ruler who will promote the kind of community that fits with God's priorities. This new king will see that justice is done. In the Hebrew scriptures, that means that the strong don't take advantage of the weak, that the poor are provided for and the vulnerable, like widows, orphans and resident aliens are protected. Those same priorities are present everywhere in Jesus' ministry and teaching. He lived the sort of care for the poor and vulnerable that Jeremiah identified as the marker of the sort of king God would raise up. Even though Herod the Great's sons, Antipas, Archelaus and Philip, ruled as Roman proxies over Israel, Jesus was the only one who embodied the sort of kingship promised by Jeremiah. In that light, Jesus was more of a king than any of them ever were.

Our gospel reading tells how Jesus was crucified with a sign hung over him that announced, "This is the king of the Jews." The message Rome wanted to send to the Jewish people was simple: Rome is all-powerful. Rome can destroy you and anyone who gets in our way, even the king of the Jews. Rome can humiliate you, we can subject you to such pain that you'll blubber like a baby, because we are in complete control. But Luke describes how Jesus didn't blubber like a baby. Jesus let people see that Rome's power extended only as far as death, but Jesus had entrusted himself to God, who is not limited by death. And Jesus not only showed how weak Rome was. He also showed how true power is exercised in the kingdom of God—with forgiveness and mercy. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those responsible for his death, because how could they recognize the ways they had been manipulated by imperial power and propaganda. Jesus also showed mercy to the thief crucified next to him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus embodied the values of the reign of God, where every person is loved, and where people are set free from condemnation and fear. Rome meant for Jesus' execution to be the end of him and his movement. Instead, Jesus showed that the kingdom of God, present in his way of compassion and forgiveness, would outlast Rome's arrogance and cruelty. The kingdom of God is the only power worthy of our love and loyalty.

Our epistle, from the letter to the Colossians, was addressed to people who knew all about how Rome exercised power. Roman was brutal and cruel in protecting imperial interests. They knew that Jesus had been executed as a criminal by Rome. But those believers had also experienced the power of Jesus' way of love to create a new world where there is true peace and justice, not the fake peace and fake justice of Rome. "Paul" writes to remind the believers that Jesus is king of a counter-cultural kingdom, and living in that kingdom means being rescued from the chaos and oppression that are humanity's normal state of affairs in order to live in a way that is determined by love. Christ is not a king who imposes his rule to dominate us. Instead, Jesus' life and Jesus' way of love express the hidden order of the universe. When we see Jesus, we've seen the secret that makes everything in life finally make sense—every person is loved, and love is the only thing that matters! Jesus is so much more than any king or emperor, and living under his rule, living according to his way of compassion and forgiveness, is the only life worth living. Jesus is the only king worthy of our allegiance.

When we give our allegiance to Christ, when we call Christ our king, it doesn't involve any bowing and scraping before a massive ego, and it isn't like serving the whims of some human

king. Instead, it's serving God's vision for the human family made whole. It's recognizing Jesus' authority to show us our own true life and our own greatest joy—a life that is set free from any other thing that would drive us so that we can embrace a humane and sustainable life, so we can give ourselves to Jesus' way of love of God and love of neighbor.

Giving our allegiance to Christ and calling Christ our king also means that there is no one else, nothing else, that we trust to keep our eyes focused on the path of love that leads to life and blessing and hope and peace and joy. There is no other king we can serve who will give us the life we long for. The market is not going to do that. TV is not going to do that. A new car, a new job, a new relationship—none of them are going to do that. No political program or personal accomplishment is going to do that. Only Jesus, calling us to follow his way of compassion, forgiveness, humility and generosity, will lead us to a life set free and made whole, the life God most desires for us.

Jesus is our one and only king. Thanks be to God. Amen