

Who's In Charge?  
 2Samuel 23:1-7  
 John 18:33-37  
 November 26, 2006

Today is the last day of the church year and is called Christ the King Sunday or the Festival of the Reign of Christ. This is not an ancient celebration like Easter or Christmas; in fact it is less than 100 years old. In 1925, Pope Pius XI established this day to declare that Christ is king, Christ is the goal of human history, Christ is the joy of all who hear, and the fulfillment of all our aspirations. In a world that was reeling from the aftershock of the First World War and gearing up amid the chaos for the Second World War, this festival sought to offer hope good news to the afflicted.

And it still is much needed good news, an antidote to the daily array of truly bad news that bombards us. But when you picked up the newspaper this morning to glance at the headlines before getting ready for church, do you remember what the headline was? The banner Herald ran "Mayoral Candidates Field the Questions, but Do They Have the Answers?" and the AJC led with "Iraq Rebels use Crime to Fund War." The pages of these newspapers and others around the country and around the world contain today among others, stories about local, state and national government, stories about crime, murders, assassinations, opinion pieces and letters to the editor. Sections devoted to Sports reveal the highs and lows of yesterday's Georgia-Georgia Tech game—in fact both newspapers put the final scores above their masthead. Family Life or Culture and the Arts sections provide new recipes, book and theater reviews, movie listings, advice from "Dear Abby", crossword puzzles, horoscopes, and a comics page. Shoppers can find advertisements for Macy's, Penney's, Best Buy, Target, or K-Mart and coupons for the next trip to the grocery store. Today's Banner-Herald had 25 advertising inserts that had to weigh at least 2 lbs.! But nowhere within today's Sunday papers will we find mention of the big news that Christians around the world are proclaiming today. No newspaper headline will blare out in giant type across the front page "Christ is King."

In today's world, religion is fine as long as we keep it in its place, private and personal, away from the really important things like politics, economics, money, and power. It is something to be expressed as a personal option on Sundays, alone or with others, and put away during the work week. As a consequence, religious faith for many often seems to have very little relevance to "real life," to the here and now. And if Christ is king, well then, it's of some nebulous, heavenly kingdom "up there" somewhere that we attain only after death, and doesn't pertain to the present day.

And yet, that is not the way early Christians understood it, and before them, that's not the way their Jewish forebears understood it. On his deathbed, King David speaks about the blessings of good government. "When one rules justly, ruling in the fear of God, it is like the dawning of morning light. It is like the springing of green grass after rain." Good governance is based, not on political wheeling and dealing, on violence, and the use of unrestrained force, but on the work and will of God. And all forms of human organization, all human standards of right and wrong, must answer to the one who created and ordered the world. The people of Israel understood that the power of all governments and kings is relative. There is but one true and rightful rule, the God who made heaven and earth, and any good rule by human rulers is established upon and within the rule of God (Will Willimon, "Who Sits on the Throne?", *Pulpit Resources*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2003, p. 34).

The Bible frequently celebrates the Lord as a king, who as our Psalter proclaimed earlier, "has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old . . .

Your decrees are very sure.” Nothing can shake the firm rule of God – not the floods, not the thunders of many waters, not the waves of the sea.

When Jesus was brought before Pilate he bore no resemblance to that powerful God the psalms proclaim. In fact, Pilate had to ask “Are you the king of the Jews?” He was joking with Jesus; he couldn’t have been serious. The Jews were captive people; they had no army, no power. Pilate, backed by a huge Roman occupation force, could not see a king in this pathetic, beaten, bleeding Jewish carpenter. Kings were supposed to embody power and perfection, and standing before him was a peasant with no possessions, and mere rags covering his body, a distasteful, ugly sight.

Pilate, on the other hand, is one of the “beautiful” people, one of those with the right manners, the right clothes, the right connections. He’s the one with the Ivy-league education; he’s the one with all the money, control and influence. He was the very kind of person we admire and try to emulate—decisive, no nonsense, a man with a plan, a man going someplace; he’s got everything going for him. Beth Long, one of my lectionary buddies, remarked last Monday that Mel Gibson got it all wrong in his movie “The Passion of the Christ,” because he made the government and religious leaders distorted caricatures, monstrous, physically ugly and disgusting, sinister and incredibly evil while Jesus and his followers were the beautiful ones. But in reality, it was and is the other way around. Jesus is the ugly one, the one who doesn’t fit in, who says the wrong things and hangs out with the wrong people, he’s the one who is beaten and crucified, the suffering servant, described by Isaiah as having “no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. . . he was despised and we held him of no account” (Isa 53:2-3). If he is a king his only “throne” is a cross, and his followers are among the poorest and least powerful in the world. No wonder Pilate scoffed at the idea Jesus could possibly be a king.

And yet, despite Pilate’s judgment, the early Christians, like Peter and Paul called Jesus king and lord. In Acts, Peter addresses the crowd after Pentecost, “This Jesus whom you crucified, God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36), and Paul wrote in Philippians “God . . . highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11). And the author of Revelation declared him “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”(Rev. 19:16). This is the kind of affirmation that put early Christians on a collision course with Rome. Even though Paul and others would point out that Christians should pray for the emperor and live in peace and harmony with their neighbors, allegiance to Jesus was a threat to Rome because implied that if Christ is king, then Caesar is not. Frequently, the image of Jesus as King and Lord came into conflict with the sovereignty of Caesar as king and lord. Although Jesus had said “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s,” they knew “since Caesar, even when he called himself Lord, was only king and emperor, while Jesus was King of all kings and Lord of all lords, not simply one in a series of lords. They knew there was nothing due to Caesar that was not due also, and first, to God” (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 1985, p. 49). Paul, Andrew, James, John and others paid for this affirmation with their lives. Rome could not tolerate opposition to Caesar as supreme king.

And now here we are today, 2000 years later, heirs to David, to the psalmists, to the gospel writers, to those early martyrs. Can we make a claim for Christ as king in a world so different from theirs? King David’s affirmation that government is most powerful, most beautiful, and life giving when it is in harmony with the creative purposes of God, isn’t heard much in the corridors of power. And even though we’ve tried to clean up Jesus, dressing him in a business suit, or wrapping him in a flag, he’s still not one of the beautiful people. He still hangs out with the wrong kind of people and espouses unpopular causes – widows, children, aliens.

His message is still as threatening to the powers that be as it was in his lifetime that true kingship is revealed in love, sacrifice, and service. His are very different definitions of “king” and kingdom than what we’re used to because they are tied to God and God’s ways rather than to our false gods we tend to worship and their ways. (Will Willimon, p. 35).

And so like those who have gone before us, we find ourselves to be citizens of two countries and have two allegiances—on the one hand we are citizens of this country, and on the other, we are people of the covenant, and like King David, are answerable to a higher standard of judgment than the laws of the state, or even our own conscience. Our lives and our actions are judged by how well they confirm to the plans and purposes of God (Willimon, p. 35) and to the teachings of Jesus who said that the heart of the law is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. He is the one who counseled “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44) and who reminded “you cannot love God and wealth,” (Matt. 6:24) He is the one who warned “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matt. 7:1) and advised “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”(Matt. 7:12). Those are the kind of mandates that are in direct opposition to the rules of the world that teach us “Kill or be killed,” “Greed is good,” and “Do unto others before they do unto you.”

We have a choice to make every day of our lives— where is our primary allegiance? Who is in charge of our lives? Who is our king? And how we answer those questions forms the very basis of our lives and how we live them.

No, there wasn’t anything in the paper about it this morning, but when we read all the bad news that makes it seem like the world is coming apart in an orgy of violence and death, chaos swirls around us, and shrill voices clamor for our attention and prey on our fears and anxieties; .and when we see all the advertisements that are practically suffocating in their insistence that money can buy happiness and protect us from all ills, then, like our brothers and sisters of old, it’s good to celebrate Christ the King. It’s good to remember who sits on the throne. It’s good to know who’s in charge.