

King of Kings

Luke 23:1-43 (*passim*)

November 21, 2010

I.

What's going on with the people who choose our Gospel readings? Why did we just hear a story about the crucifixion. Isn't that part of Holy Week rather than preparation for Christmas?

Actually, it's part of both. If you recall our readings and my sermon last week, I said then that we were beginning a three week series of teachings about God's plans for the end of the age. These stories come up at this time every year.

Last week we heard about signs and tribulations that would occur just before Jesus returns. This week, we recognize the divine nature of Jesus Christ that makes him our King, and ordains him to return and rule as Lord of our lives. And next week, the first Sunday in Advent, we anticipate that actual event; Christ's coming again to complete God's kingdom on earth.

So today is recognized throughout the church as Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday in Pentecost. It's the last Sunday in the church year, and this is the last time you have to look at those service bulletins we have been using since June.

II.

And today we celebrate the eternal reality of Christ as our king. The Collect of the Day described Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah told of the coming of a new shepherd who will reign as king and execute justice. The Psalm recounted prophecies of a mighty savior.

Then the reading from Colossians spoke of how God has rescued us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. Finally, Luke's Gospel helps tie it together. It shows what we mean as we say Jesus Christ is king, and it confirms how his kingship is radically different from worldly ideas of what a king is or what a king might do.

Let's imagine the scene in the Gospel. Jesus was nailed to the cross and a sign above his head proclaimed him king of the Jews. That sign, however, was not evidence of Christ's heavenly kingship. His executioners were mocking him just as when they challenged him to come down off the cross. Our belief in Christ as our king comes from something else in today's reading.

And that something else is the exchange between Jesus and the criminal who came to faith on the cross. Somehow he knew who Jesus was. He asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. He didn't ask to get off the cross, and indeed confessed that he deserved his fate. But that criminal understood something about the kingdom, and knew Jesus was the key.

He knew that Jesus was not a military king, or a king that Romans would respect, but rather a king with far greater power to do good through his love for humanity. And that kingship became evident on the cross, was confirmed in the resurrection, and is unfolding today in preparation for when he comes again to bring God's kingdom to all believers.

John's Gospel made this clear beyond all doubt when he described Jesus' appearance before Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to die. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (Jn. 18:36).

And he also was identifying himself with what Paul later would write in our reading from Colossians. He was confirming that he would rescue us from darkness, give us to the light, and bring us into his kingdom where we would have redemption and forgiveness.

So when Jesus stood before Pilate and said that his kingdom was not of this world, he proclaimed that through him God's heavenly kingdom had come to earth. And he also identified himself as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy as we heard in Jeremiah.

III.

That's quite a statement. Do people believe it? Who do most people think Jesus is, really? Is he the King of kings and Lord of lords as the Collect described him, or is he something else?

For openers, I think we can say that Jesus was not crucified because he was just suggesting a few changes here and a few changes there. He was not just urging us to be nicer to each other. Instead he proclaimed the coming of an entirely new spiritual order. And he threatened the existence of earthly institutions with heavenly truths.

All four Gospels, for example, show that he acknowledged his messianic role for humanity, and claimed a unique relationship with God. He took it upon himself to forgive the sins of others, and described himself as the Son of Man, which people of the time understood as a divine title.

In addition, he made exceptional claims about himself elsewhere in John's Gospel. He said I am the bread of life (6:35) and the light of the world (8:12). I am the gate for the sheep (10:7-9), and the good shepherd (10:11-14). I am the resurrection (11:23-25). I am the way, and the truth, and the life (14:5-6), and I am the vine that gives life (15: 1, 5).

Then, on top of that, when we consider that he raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons, we have a picture of an extremely unique person, all of which leads to an inescapable reality. And that reality is that that Jesus is the Son of God. We simply cannot regard him as a respected teacher or as a good man, and nothing more. He does not give us that option.

IV.

I have mentioned how C.S. Lewis made this point in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. He said that if Jesus were merely human he would have been regarded as egocentric, arrogant, or a fool. No mortal person could make the astonishing claims that Jesus made, and say the shocking things that he said, and then get away with just being called a respected teacher or a good man.

And I would suggest that as much as people might search for it, there is no neutral position. There is no fence upon which we can sit. Jesus is either the Son of God or he was a fraud. He cannot have been merely a distinguished or respected person by worldly standards.

So we actually have three choices. We can believe Jesus thought he was the Son of God but was mistaken, or we can believe he knew he was not the Son of God but claimed to be anyway, or we can believe that Jesus truly is who he says he is.

Let's look at these choices. What if Jesus was mistaken? What if he actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not. Well, history unfortunately has had its share of people who believed they were gods, and no one ever thought they were respected teachers or good men.

Or what if Jesus was a deceiver? What if he knew that he was not God, yet intentionally said he was so that he could gain a following. Well, if this is true, if Jesus did mislead us, then we as Christians would be a gullible and pathetic bunch of people. Again, that hardly is the legacy of a respected teacher or good man.

So, unless we reject everything the Bible tells us about Jesus, the inescapable conclusion is that he is who he said he is. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. He is king of our lives, and his kingdom comes from God. And as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, we do so knowing that our faith is grounded in the truth.

Unfortunately, however, our faith is not universally shared. Some people worry more about earthly consequences than heavenly truths. When they hear that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world might say, "Whew! That's a relief. It's just a spiritual thing. It doesn't affect real life." Or they might regard it as a happy thought for Sunday, but not much else.

But if we really do believe that Christ is the King and that his birth was the beginning of God's kingdom, then everything changes.

In fact, if we do believe that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, then it has a greater claim over us than the systems and institutions of the world that we experience every day. If Christ is the King, then we clearly are called to follow him and to lead our lives in ways that prepare us for the reality of what he has promised.

V.

In any event, here we are. The end of the church year brings us full circle. During the past year we shared the significance of the manger. We walked with Christ through the Gospels, and stood at the cross and renewed our eternal hope through our Lord's resurrection. We heard once again how the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples, and hopefully we were inspired by Jesus' teachings that eventually would be the foundation of the church he would leave behind.

And no matter how many times we come to this point, the stories never grow old. It seems there always is something new and exciting that strengthens and comforts us. And it has been that way for countless generations. How is that possible? How can the greatest story ever told remain so new and vital and alive?

Jesus Christ is the answer. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and his kingdom comes to us from God. We experience through him the means of grace of the hope of glory. And with him we find peace in the world now and look forward to the life of the world to come. *Amen.*