

“PORTRAIT OF A KING”
2 Samuel 23:1-7; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37
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Today is the end of the year, the Christian year, that is. This last Sunday of the Christian year, just before the beginning of Advent, is known as “Christ the King/Reign of Christ” Sunday, and each of the texts focuses on the Christ’s role as king. Now before we jump into the texts for the week I would like you to think for a moment about “kings.” Who and what comes to mind?

Here are some brief sketches of a few kings I thought about this week: King George III of England: He was the longest reigning of the male British monarchs, reigning from 1760-1820. He was king of Great Britain and Ireland and although his reign stretched for 60 years, George III is widely remembered for two things: losing the American colonies and going mad. It is interesting to note, however, that George’s direct responsibility for the loss of the colonies is not great. He opposed their bid for independence to the end, but he did not develop the policies (such as the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend duties of 1767 on tea, paper and other products) which led to war in 1775-76 and which had the support of Parliament. I also found myself thinking of The King from Rumpelstiltskin:

In this fairy tale a miller seeks to make himself seem more important, so he tells the king that his daughter can spin straw into gold. In light of this information, the king calls for the daughter and locks her in a tower room with a pile of straw to be turned into gold in three days. Of course, she cannot do such a thing; but a dwarf bails her out by using his magic to turn the straw into gold. The king’s greed and lust for gold overwhelm him, and he marries the miller’s daughter never knowing the bargains she has made with Rumpelstiltskin.

And then there was King Tutankhamen. Tutankhamen is actually only of moderate significance, and most of his modern popularity stems from the fact that his tomb in the Valley of the Kings was discovered almost completely intact. His most significant effect was to begin transitioning Egypt back to their familiar Egyptian religion.

Ruling from age nine, most of his rule was probably led by his advisor and eventual successor. Despite this and his short ten year reign, Tutankhamen is currently the most famous of the Pharaohs, and the only one to have a nickname in popular culture (“King Tut”). The 1923 discovery of Tutankhamen’s nearly intact tomb received worldwide press coverage and is largely credited with renewed public interest in ancient Egypt.

There were many more, too. From Prince William, the future king of England, to King Herod of biblical times, to the short oaf of a king depicted in the newspaper comic the “Wizard of Id.” I could think of many kings, but not many of them inspired me to think of Jesus and how the role of a King might be one I choose when I think about Jesus the Christ. Christ the King Sunday falls at a unique time in our culture because it is virtually impossible to forget that Christmas is just around the corner, and yet we haven’t even entered into Advent yet. Our texts for this week are just a little reminder about what the upcoming season of Advent is really about. They are a bit of a cultural reality check, they might as well announce: “Don’t worry if you haven’t even begun to think about Christmas shopping, there is still time.” But more important than setting our minds at ease, however, our lectionary texts remind us that there other things to think about beyond making our lists and checking

them twice. For example, I love that Christ the King Sunday falls after we have passed the “biggest shopping day of the year” and we aren’t yet in Advent. Christ the King Sunday reminds us that in order to be ready to enter into Advent—that is, to enter “into the season set aside for preparing for Christ’s coming”—in order to be ready to be ready, perhaps we should hear the breadth of the Christ story one more time. And thus, our readings weave together a medley of stories that proclaim the long story of Jesus Christ’s ascension to the role of King.

Over the last few weeks, the lessons from the Hebrew scriptures have been directed through the story of Ruth towards David as king. Last week’s psalm was an influential text for the Magnificat, the song of Mary that we hear during Advent.

Thus, the connection between David and Jesus is reinforced. This week we read “the last words of David” in 2 Samuel 23:1-7 in which the ideals of kingship for David’s line are stressed.” David outlines how a king should rule and speaks glowingly of a peace that comes under a just rule. Living in Oregon, David’s words, “One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land,” seem especially desirable. Most importantly, David makes it clear in this text that his rule is dependent on a relationship with God, and that he is anointed because of God’s hand. As we look down the lineage of David to the birth of Jesus, God’s hand remains in the center of the action.

The epistle lesson for this week comes from the Revelation to John. In this passage we have a small sense of the Apocalyptic nature of John’s writing; but, more importantly, this text speaks to the unending nature of God. In the oft-quoted eighth verse God announces, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Note that this passage is from the very beginning of this book, a book that is filled with apocalyptic proclamations about the future; and yet, for all the end-times language that follows, God’s presence is announced as being “at the beginning and the end.” The verse ends by speaking of God as the one “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” The book of Revelation is a difficult book to understand; even on my best theological-student days there are parts that I would rather pull out and toss in the recycling bin than try to understand, but there is nothing ambiguous about these verses.

On this Christ the King Sunday, this passage reminds us that God is present through whatever we are experiencing, whenever we are experiencing it. In the beginning of a book that is largely about the end of time, there is God. This text is sort of a one sentence wrap-up of the bible, taking us from Genesis all the way to present time: In the beginning: God; in the end: God; in the midst of life: God. For the followers of Jesus, those who were perhaps feeling lost as they tried to build the early church, this passage is less about their particular time and place than it is a faith-statement of sorts. This passage proclaims Jesus to be “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” “Firstborn of the dead” and “ruler of the kings of the earth” draw upon the 89th Psalm in which God promises to make the king of Israel his “firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth”. Australian theologian William Loader notes that “Christians took over this idea and applied it to Jesus, when they celebrated him as Israel’s Messiah (= Christ = Anointed King). “Firstborn” belongs to the ancient notion that the king was adopted as God’s son. “You are my son; today I have begotten you” were words spoken to a king at his coronation.

Christians came to interpret the resurrection of Jesus as a coronation in which God appointed Jesus as his son in this sense. For Christians, Jesus was the king which Israel hoped for, the one who would be superior to all others.

Finally, there is the Easter message here as Jesus, the anointed King, was the first to be raised from the dead; the first “born” of the dead.” On this Christ the King Sunday we have a gospel lesson that takes us to the trial of Jesus and the conversation that took place between Pilate and Jesus. John’s gospel depicts that trial as something that is completely different from any trial we are used to. There are no sworn oaths, no court-room procedures, and no clients represented by legal counsel. Instead, there is Jesus, being questioned by Pilate. And rather than being some formal proceeding, this trial seems to be a debate of sorts. Listen again to the interaction between Pilate and Jesus: Pilate: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied: “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus: “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.” Pilate: “So you are a king?” Jesus: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Well that is clear, isn’t it?

I think that because we don’t have any experience with monarchy we are at a disadvantage when reading about kings. In biblical times, and really all the way up through the enlightenment, the king was the author and guarantor of the prosperity of his people– if he followed the rules of justice and obeyed divine commandments.

The proper function for a King was to promote fertility about him: in animals, vegetation, and in a growing and thriving population. Kings ensured prosperity all around them. Thus, subjects expected peace and prosperity, security and abundance, from their kings. But rather than speaking the language of a king, Jesus is speaking the language of truth. He is speaking of a kingdom that is “beyond this world.” Nowhere in the words of Jesus are there ideas about bringing prosperity to farms or power to a village.

Instead, this King calls for a new commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Christ the King is answering in a decidedly “un-kingly” fashion. And that is the point. On this Christ the King Sunday, we witness the ancestor of Jesus exalting just rule. We hear Christ proclaimed as the first-born of an ever-present God, and we hear Jesus himself twisting his own reign into a previously unheard of state of truth and love. From these varied images and all our real-life and fairy-tale depictions of kings, we are left to discern how the reign of Christ means anything to us. And isn’t that how it should be as we gather on the precipice of Advent? Here we are, waiting for the season of Advent to begin, so that we can meet our king: the one with power and principles that we have yet to comprehend.

I’ve read the bible enough to know about the life and ministry of Jesus, yet sometimes I still find myself uncomfortable speaking about Jesus as a king. As Jesus rebuffs Pilate by saying, “You say that I am a king,” it reminds me that the “who Jesus is” question is really a personal one. Next week we will start talking about Jesus as that baby announced by angels and proclaimed through history; but this week, before we get too blinded by the gift wrap and the baby, I would like to suggest that we should be painters, painting a portrait of Christ the King so that we know what he looks like in our theology, in our hearts, and most importantly for our world. So I say to you: Happy Painting! Thanks be to God. Amen.