

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

Christ Our King

On Sunday, November 20 we celebrated Christ the King Sunday—the final Sunday of our church year. On that day we honor the fact that in the end, all that ever was or is or will be belongs to God. That Christ is our true King. And this message is worth reminding ourselves of, for good reason.

Christ the King Sunday is a relatively young holiday in the history of the Christian church. It didn't start being celebrated in the Middle Ages or in the 1500s, but actually was created in 1925, as a reaction to Benito Mussolini's rise to power. In reminding people that Christ is the Supreme Ruler of the World, the Italian Church of that time helped believers trust that no matter what kind of earthly powers a particular person amassed or expected, Christ would have the last and best word, always. The church hoped that this reminder would provide hope and life in the face of death and misuse of power—that it would transform the people of God to fiercely claim their identity as people of resurrection in the face of ones who proclaimed that death would have the final word. This day, Christ the King, offers assurance that we still need today—that no matter how many other powers try to claim our attention and allegiance, no matter what else happens in our world, in our nation, in our churches, in our homes, Christ is still the King of all.

This can be a challenge for us to get our heads around, because we don't really live in a world where kings and queens rule (at least in the same way). I love the show *The Crown*, a show about Queen Elizabeth the II, but it doesn't make me any more prepared to understand what it means to have Jesus as my King. Jesus is not, like those rulers today, a simple figurehead without much real authority. He is not merely a symbol for us that reminds of God's love while the really important people actually govern our lives. He is also not like other powerful leaders—dictators, war lords, etc.—who use the title of king or queen but instead total control. Jesus is not like that, either.

So what is Jesus' kingship like? What does it mean for us to be ruled by Jesus? Before we can answer what kind of king Jesus is, we need to answer this question first: what kind of king isn't he? And how do our assumptions about royalty and leadership keep us from understanding Jesus' power among us?

In the story of the Passion, When Jesus arrives at the place called The Skull, where he is to die, people immediately begin taunting him, shouting things like "If he is a king, let him save himself! And are you not the king? The chosen one? Save yourself and us!" Listen to those assumptions—a king is one who does not suffer, who does not die. Power does not show weakness, does not lose, does not admit vulnerability, does not admit defeat. Real kings can save their constituents—are in control of the fate of the people they govern over, and can use their unrelenting power to defeat others for the sake of the salvation of their own people. How do these assumptions, these expectations about power and how bad and weak vulnerability is—infect our hearts today?

Here he is: Jesus, the one who has come into the world that God so loves. Jesus, the one who cares so much about meeting us in our shame and giving us abundant life that he changes water into wine and then dances with us. Jesus, the one who takes off his outer robe so that he can kneel before us and wash our feet and teach us how to love one another. And in this reading, here is Jesus—the one who puts on a purple robe, a crown of thorns, and stands confidently while those he loves so dearly mock him and demand his death.

It is painful to hear the people in the story so blatantly reject Jesus. It is hard to hear how desperately they cling to violence, terror, and the regime of the empire—an empire that loves to kill and destroy and shame—and they would rather be a part of that than allow themselves to experience the love, vulnerability, and grace of Jesus.

The people in this story don't realize that they're standing in the presence of God (or, they know that they're standing in God's presence and are so terrified that they'd rather kill God than deal with what it might mean to receive abundant love). The words they hurl at Jesus, the assumptions about kingship and power that they hurl at Jesus, are painful and misplaced. And yet, these words also reveal a deep, painful truth—that when we have aligned ourselves with praise of power, glory, and never showing weakness, we have aligned ourselves with violence and death. Not love and justice. The people in this story have aligned themselves with Caesar, who also calls himself the Son of God. It is Caesar that they worship. There is no room for God in that equation.

It's easy to read this story from our perspective today and think "how could they? Didn't they know?" To read, and be reminded of all those times when we have been astonished by the harsh words or opinions of others. To think of all the ways that the brokenness of this world has shown up in people around us and shocked us.

But as much as we want to think that this is a story about other people's allegiance, it's a story about our allegiance too. About where our loyalty lies. About who we really worship, who or what we really call the Son of God in our lives.

This story is one about being on trial. Jesus stands before the crowds, having been convicted to death on a cross. The king of all, the one who knows all of our hearts and our mistakes and our wrongdoings and our hopes and our fears stands in front of the Roman governor, knowing that this man's power is so small and limited—that the power to kill God is a joke, because nothing—not even death—will ever stop God. Jesus stands there, gets spit on, gets taunted, gets dressed in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, and gets laughed at. Hail Caesar, the people cry out. You are no king, they say.

This story is one about being on trial—but the ones who are really on trial are all the other characters in this story. The ones who are really on trial here in this story are you and I.

This is a story about all the ways we condemn ourselves by refusing to accept or acknowledge the power of Jesus, choosing instead the powers of empire, death, violence, and ignorance. Jesus says when he washes the disciples' feet that his servants will be known by their love, and that the servants of the empire will be known by their violence.

Whose servants are we, friends? When we leave worship, whose servants are we?

When we walk through the world and encounter those different from us, will we bear false witness against our neighbor? Will we mischaracterize those who are suffering in this world to help us feel more justified in our security? Will we worship our denomination, or our preferred political party, or our GPA, or our career, or our country more than we worship God?

Here's the thing—the answer to all of these questions is yes. Yes, we will think evil and violent thoughts about something or someone. Yes, every single one of us in this room will worship something more than God. Yes, all of us will, in our actions and our words, at least once, proclaim "Hail Caesar" rather than "Praise God."

It feels kind of awful to realize, but when given the chance, as broken human beings, we choose things that extinguish life over the one who has come to love the whole world. This reading makes us take that sharp breath in because it reveals a hard truth about all of us. We keep picking Caesar, picking Barabbas, picking the cross, rather than picking abundant life, vulnerability, love, and grace.

This is a story about being on trial, and we always come up short. And it is extremely important that we admit that and think long and hard about it. Because until we do, we cannot understand the kind of king that Jesus is.

Because this is a story about grace.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ comes to this earth to teach us about love and it was so high risk and terrifying to us that we fashion a crown of thorns and a cross for him. God builds community, and we respond by building a cross. And yet, in the face of mockery, violence, and hatred, Jesus still picks up that cross, walks to the place called the Skull, and lays down his life for us. He joins us in our suffering, letting us know that we don't go through anything in this life alone, because God is so compassionate that God knows what our pain and our agony feel like.

This is what grace is all about. This is what power looks like. This is what a real, holy, divine king looks like. Even when we beg for God's death rather than be vulnerable and admit our own failings, God chooses us. When we fashion a crown of thorns and shout "Hail Caesar," and treat each other horribly and ignore one another and refuse to consider the perspective of another person, God chooses us. When we think way too highly of ourselves and others, God chooses us. When we think too little of ourselves and others, God chooses us.

God keeps on choosing us, even when we laugh at God and doubt God's power.

God keeps on choosing us, even when we try to kill God so that we don't have to deal with that annoying grace and truth stuff anymore.

God will keep on choosing us, friends. Always. May we learn how to live in response to being chosen and marked by God's love. May we remember that in the face of all the ugly powers of this world, the ugly powers of our own hearts, that Christ is more powerful than all of it. And his kingship is not marked by anger or hatred, but by love and tender vulnerability. By hope and the promise of newness.

Hallelujah, for as Richard Rohr once said: If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord, then the economy stock market are not. If Jesus is Lord, then my possessions, country, and job are not. If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. This is good news for us, beloved. Because being anything other than deeply loved by the one who created us and makes us new is above our pay grade.

Our King lives—he lives to make us all live. We have been set free by grace that claims our hearts and makes us new. Praise be to Christ, our true King. Amen

In Christ, Pastor Marissa