

## **CHRIST, THE KING**

Today is the day of “Christ, The King” in our Church calendar. It is a Sunday of transition from one church year to a new cycle as we prepare to move into the season of Advent. Next Sunday we will start to celebrate new beginnings with the Advent season with its mood of expectation as we all look forward to the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Already there are signs of Christmas about us. In some communities the Christmas wreaths are up and the Malls are enticing us with their Christmas merchandise. So the commercial side of Christmas is already thinking ahead to the coming season. But it is a season, we should remind ourselves, that has nothing to do with shopping and keeping the national economy afloat.

The day of Christ, the King is a transitional day in the church calendar. It is a day in which we remember what we are about to celebrate in the birth of the baby Jesus. In reminding ourselves of the title that has been given to Jesus, “Christ, the King,” we can put ourselves in readiness for the coming of the Sovereign glory in the child in the bare and drafty manger. The Sovereign King, born in a stable amongst the beasts of burden and at the heart of the daily life of the farm and to whom we sing: “Joy to the world, The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King.”

But I am not sure that we think very much of Royalty these days! Over the past decade looking at the British Royal family it would not seem to be anything special to be “royalty”. In our democratic age the whole notion of Kingship is something to be questioned rather than looked up to. The descent of British Royalty into the realm of ordinariness and our own very republican (with a small ‘r’) national feeling hides from us the real force of the metaphor of Kingship, the idea of Royalty and Sovereignty that appears in the Bible.

The mythology of Babylon permeates the early chapters of Genesis, and although it is changed out of all recognition by the new Hebraic concepts of God you can still feel the power of its images. In ancient mythology the King was not just the constitutional ruler, the King was the very power of God in whom order is established and security is brought to the land. The presence of the King was the presence of God in the midst of his people. And so the King was not just the ‘ruler,’ he was the one who established the very law which enabled his people to live in peace and harmony. The King, in other words, was the guarantor of peace, order and justice.

The talk of Jesus as King, therefore, is of one who brings order and peace into a world of disorder, of one who brings justice where there is no justice.

When the prophet Jeremiah was alive the Kings of Israel and Judah had become despotic and somewhat tyrannical leaders of small nations which had to find ways to keep afloat in a dangerous world. As Kings they ignored their role as religious leaders and looked primarily to the global politics of survival. The Shepherds have left their sheep to stray and get lost. What then is there but to see that there is nothing but trouble left for the people. But Jeremiah looked forward to the time when the leader would again come who could properly be called King. He would be one who would establish, again, the principles of order and security. Such a King would be one who would establish justice amongst his people, and they would be able to live once again in a land where righteousness reigned.

In the New Testament you find this passage from Jeremiah emerge again and again as a way of understanding Jesus and his life. The good shepherd who looks after his sheep, the shepherd who will not rest while there is one which is still lost and astray. We are reminded of

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the needs of a people who are without structure and order in their lives. The chaos of a life in which direction and the sense of how to live and how to act are all lost, cries out for some principle of organization, some principle of leadership which will bring peace.

Jesus, the gospel writers tell us, brings such peace because he gives us the way and the life. This is the heart of the meaning of the ruler who brings righteousness to the world. When we live with the law of love we have a sense of direction to our lives that fills life with purpose and gives us assurance in our living. The bringer of such a law of love to our lives must be the sovereign lord of our lives. We, therefore, have our King. Such royalty is brought into our very innermost being, determines our lives, and determines the very basis of our actions. Such a King we worship and acknowledge as our leader and the founder of our true lives.

The King who is the true shepherd is always present and is always there to be looked to for help in time of need. We know that what He brings is a love which enables us to live in love with others.

Such a King is no earthly ruler, but is one who keeps the principles of justice and living rightly ever before us, and who presents to us the best possibilities for our living. No wonder the early Hebrews thought of God as the only true King, and the earthly King was but a representative of God on earth. The earthly King was but the protector of the House of God, but as such was to be revered.

But when you read this passage in Luke, a passage that describes the events leading to the crucifixion, you notice that there is something odd about this notion of Kingship when it is applied to Jesus. The title is given to Jesus with scorn; Jesus is made to wear a crown of thorns; Jesus is stripped of his garments, not given grand robes of crimson velvet and silk. Jesus is elevated above others, as are all kings, but he is elevated upon a cross of shame, his throne is a gallows.

What is going on here, we may ask? Is this the King of whom the prophets spoke? Is this the King of whom Jeremiah told, he who was to come as a branch of David's line? Is this the king who would bring peace and order to the world? This humbled man upon a cross of death who could not defend himself, this was the King of the Jews. The Gospels tell us something very important about this King, and about the meaning of divine sovereignty. God does not work through the power structures of the world, nor does he work through the orders of our existence in the way we expect. Kingship is not pomp and ceremony and stately power. The Kingship of Jesus is not the kingship of palaces and thrones of gold and silver. The cup from which he drinks is nothing more than a sponge plunged into some wine. There is something to be learned about honor and glory and power here on the cross – far more than you will earn in the remaining palaces in this world.

“Joy to the World, thy Lord has come: Let earth receive her King.” Receive this broken figure on the cross? Is this what we would expect? Is it for this we cry “Joy.” Luke is surely telling us something strange and important about Kingship.

The painter Rouault painted a canvas which he called “The Old King.” It is a striking painting of the head of a man filled with sorrow, lined with furrows created by an understanding of the pain of the world. But it is not only the understanding of pain that appears on his face. As you look at the old King you see that he has absorbed the pains of the world and has taken those sorrows into his own heart. This King does not impose order upon the world, but rather takes upon himself the disorder that has caused the pain and the torment and gives back a loving

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concern that gives healing. Compare this painting with Holbein's famous painting of Henry VIII. Henry stands astride the world with authority and power. In the face of the "Old King," however, you see the power of healing. Your tears are made his tears and your own sorrow becomes easier to bear. Life is made meaningful because in those sad eyes you can see a love that enfolds you.

What Rouault has captured in this magnificent painting is the very meaning of Kingship that Luke would have us understand as really belonging to Jesus.

We are to understand Jesus as King as one who has come to bring justice and peace. But he comes not with a sword, not with the power of armies, nor with the scepter of earthly dominion, but with the power to take up our sorrows and the capacity for absorbing our pain, the power to show us the meaning of love and the means by which we can understand the real meaning of righteousness.

Can we live with this picture of Christ, the King? When we see a picture of a King we would prefer it to be one like that painted of Henry the Eighth – a picture of a man possessed of himself, sure of his power, sure of his position in society, sure of what he wants, and sure of what he can do. Surely we think that of God. Can we really absorb the message that Luke gives to us, the ambiguous picture of the sovereignty we see there upon the Cross? For this is a picture of vulnerability. But surely that is the power of this message that Luke gives us. The power of Jesus and the power of his lordship are to be found in the love that leads to his taking our lives into his own; in the care that makes each one of us his own concern. It is to be found in the passionate looking of the shepherd who sets out to find the one stray lamb. It is found in the one who accepts a crude wooden cross as a throne from which to rule. He is the King who is a shepherd.

John Dykes when he rewrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm put it simply: "The King of Love my Shepherd is."

As King of Love, he is also the King of Sorrows. But in the manifestation of love we find a new way in which to live. In that sorrow we are given the way to justice. In that sorrow we are given a way in which we can find understanding. And what we understand is the power of a heart that takes up the chaos of a disturbed and distorted world. The King on the Cross is king not because there were those who pinned a sign on the cross proclaiming him "King of the Jews," but because he accepted that gratuitous insult in love and understanding and forgiveness.

In that he became our King, our Lord, the Master of our destiny, and in that He created a new world for us, a world with a new order and a new life – the order of love.

So when you worship Christ, the King on this day, remember the Cross is his throne, the thorns form his crown, and in that sad face in agony there is your sorrow, your burden. He is King because he was there on the Cross, yet he conquered all those other powers, for our sake.

John S. Morris, First Baptist Church, Hamilton. November 15<sup>th</sup>