# A Sermon for Christ the King

When we think of kings, words like power, authority, and obedience may come to mind. You might even think of concepts like etiquette, respect and formality, and that kings and queens must be treated as superior to commoners. Even the term 'commoner' is a rather loaded one!

So what does it mean when we celebrate this feast of Christ the King. What are we saying about Jesus when we call him King? And what sorts of Kings do we see in scripture?

There is a vision of a benevolent King in the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, where God promises to "raise up for David a righteous branch" as their sovereign. "He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety." This is an excellent vision. A wise leader, a just leader, and one whose reign is one which bring about safety and, hopefully, peace.

Then we have a vision of a king as an authority, as somewhat described in the letter to the Colossians: "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything." While this passage is describing Christ, its vision of a hierarchical ruler who has "first place in everything" speaks to the way kings and rulers are sometimes seen as supreme authorities whose power and influence cannot be denied, with potentially significant consequences regarding justice and fairness.

To my mind, the kind of King we should look to is someone who serves the people, and the vision of the Prophet Jeremiah aligns with such service. A King, or a Queen, should be someone who cares for them and their welfare, and does not place themselves above others. They are a source of encouragement and inspiration, through their words and their actions. All of this, Jesus embodies, and so he should be titled 'King'.

The Gospel passage is a moment where we see Jesus at his most vulnerable, and also his most powerful. He is being crucified. He is suffering torment. He is dying.

Yet in the midst of pain and brutality, he prays to God, asking God to forgive those who have condemned him to death. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." With these words, he shows that he is a King who is compassionate. He does not condemn those who have sentenced him, he offers them mercy. And he witnesses the cruelty of humanity. He sees them divide his clothing, his few possessions. He heard the people mock him, taunting him with their shouts. He is even ridiculed by the sign that hangs above him, "This is the King of the Jews". All this, he responds to with forgiveness and compassion.

Even one of the people who is suffering beside him scoffs at him. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!". And here begins one of the most extraordinary exchanges.

Jesus does not respond. However, the other criminal does. He honestly admits that he, and the other criminal, have done what they were condemned for. “We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong”, he says. Seeing something in Jesus, he then pleads: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”.

Jesus affirms, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. This is one of the few moments, and it might be unique, where someone is personally promised entry into the kingdom of heaven. The fact that is a condemned criminal who repents finds forgiveness and the promise of mercy is wonderful. Thanks be to God that such reconciliation and redemption is possible.

To me, this has always reinforced the depth of God’s love and compassion for us, as embodied through Christ. The repentant criminal is responded to with love, with grace, and with empathy. There is no condemnation for him, because he speaks honestly, and understands the consequences of his actions.

None of us are perfect. We are all in need of forgiveness. We all face moments where we need to admit our wrongs, but to know that God’s mercy is extended to us is life-changing. What is required of us is honesty. It is not easy, but that’s why Jesus is there to guide and support us along the way; to teach us, and to walk this path both before us and with us.

From the Cross, we see Jesus at his most powerful. It is the moment when his nature as a King is prominently on display, and he shows us what a true King is and does.

As a King, he is compassionate. He is willing to forgive. He cares for his people and those around him. In his moment of pain, he uses his power to redeem others, not to save himself.

His rule is one which allows people to learn and grow, rather than to control and manipulate them through regulations and decrees. And yes, he gives his people commandments to obey, but they are life-giving rather than restrictive, and also designed to liberate us. “Love one another” is the most empowering instruction we could possibly be given, and it’s up to us to act on that commandment in the best way imaginable.

My prayer for us all is that we will take the vision of Christ the King to heart, and be inspired by the compassion, empathy and love he showed to all people. Let us take that example of leadership to heart, and show it without our own lives. Let us be people who are guided by his servant leadership, which is undertaken not for ourselves, but for others, and their welfare, and thereby benefits and uplifts us all.

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