

“Royal Treatment”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 22, 2009

Christ the King Sunday

Psalm 96

Rev. John Wahl

John 18:33-37

If you’ve ever seen an episode of *Law & Order*, you might recognize this portion of the trial of Jesus as an arraignment. An arraignment involves the formal reading of a criminal complaint that spells out the basic facts and legal reasons that those who file charges believe are sufficient to support a case.¹ As the defendant, Jesus makes his first appearance before Pilate, the local Roman magistrate, who in this court serves as both judge and jury. To the charge of claiming to be King of the Jews, Pilate wants to know how Jesus will plead. On TV, the answer is always the same – “not guilty, your honor” – but here we find the response is not so straightforward. Jesus turns the tables and begins to ask Pilate the questions, prompting readers to notice that Pilate, not Jesus, seems to be the one who is actually on trial.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. “Who wants to know?” is a course rephrasing of Jesus’ response. “Did someone else put you up to this?” Here, we see Jesus laying the groundwork for what is not so much his defense as his statement of what is the truth. Jesus does not say that he is a King, but says that he does have a kingdom. He agrees that some people have called him king, but declares that only those who truly listen to his message of truth belong to that kingdom.

You may be surprised to learn that this holy day in the church – Christ the King Sunday – has only been official for the last forty years. It was just in 1969 that the final Sunday of the Christian calendar – the transition between what we call Ordinary Time and the season of Advent – was given this designation. Christ is the King, the church affirms, even if Jesus never directly claimed it. “You say that I am,” he mysteriously says to Pilate. “My kingdom is not of this world.” If it was, then my followers and I would be putting up a stronger defense. But, this is a different type of kingdom: one that someone in Pilate’s position would not recognize. Today, Jesus is not on trial, and neither is Pilate. The appropriate question for us – his modern disciples – to consider today is the one that Jesus asked of his disciples long ago – “who do you say that I am?”

¹ Emelie Townes in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

What do we, as 21st century Americans, know about kings – other than the fact that over two hundred years ago, our ancestors decided that they didn't want one? “Our brush with royalty,” writes Mary Anderson, “comes mostly from Britain. We might not be able to name any kings, but we are familiar with Queen Elizabeth and with the tabloids and tragedies surrounding her family. We would easily recognize the queen, yet many of us are unaware of what she really does from day to day and what her powers really are. Royalty is respected, it's part of the tradition, but does it really do anything? Do we need it?”²

In today's post-Christian America, I wonder how many people think of the idea that Christ rules as similar to the way that the Queen of England rules. Do some view Christ as an outdated figure of tradition, surrounded by art and beauty, but more antique than living? Do they hear the words of Christ as simply hollow noise which is – for all practical purposes – mute in these days?

It takes a great deal of translation for those of us living in this generation to understand what it means to give our allegiance to a king. And that is in part because, unlike people of previous ages, it is ours to give. A king in ancient times demanded allegiance from his subjects; there was no choice in the matter. But, for us, it is much different. We can choose to say yes or no. We can divide our allegiance between many powers and people. We can even choose to be responsible only to ourselves.

When I was in high school, one of my favorite books was F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I was intrigued by this character, Jay Gatsby, who seemed responsible to no-one but himself; on the surface, he seemed to have everything: money, friends, and sophistication. He had successfully re-invented himself and amassed a fortune and then set his sights on the one thing that he wanted most – Daisy. He threw elaborate parties at his home in the Hamptons – where everybody who was somebody would come – but it was all in order to impress this one girl.

A couple of years later, when I worked at a high school and the kids there were also reading *The Great Gatsby*, one of the students asked me this: she said, “what's so great about Gatsby?” I started to answer that he was symbolic of his generation; a prototype of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ who believed that happiness could be found in accomplishment, popularity, and all-things-material. But, I then realized what I had, since high school, discovered: that life could not be defined by the sum of our possessions. I had finally begun to understand what Jesus had said in earlier in John's gospel: that he came to live among us so that we might have abundant life.

² Mary Anderson in *Christian Century*, 2003

An abundant life is not the same as an extravagant life, or an elegant life, or an easy life. The abundance that Jesus intended requires that we offer our allegiance to something greater than ourselves. And the abundance that Jesus offers to us requires that we give our sole allegiance to God. If we try to mix it up with those other things that we can choose, we will not receive it in fullness.

Before Jesus was accused for being a king, killed for being a king, and finally crowned as a risen king, he claimed himself a shepherd. Those who have been baptized into Christ are the people of his pasture. The sheep are free to walk away, but learn to live in the freedom that their allegiance to the shepherd – and their connection to the community – ultimately gives them.

As modern Americans, we bristle at the idea of being compared to sheep. They all appear to be the same; they don't need to use their God-given brains, but simply to follow. But, that is the sometimes hard-to-recognize beauty of giving our allegiance to Christ the King. It is our choice to make. God may initiate the process by stirring our hearts, by engaging our minds, by surrounding us with Christian witnesses, or by carrying us through difficult times, but it is still our decision to say yes or no to God's invitation. It does not matter how successful we have become, how many friends we have, or how much money or possessions we have amassed. Our lives might feel full or empty. It matters not to God. We are invited to join his kingdom; one which is not of this world; which is not ruled by human rules and in which we are not judged by human standards.

Unlike any other kingdom, the one that Jesus rules is not bound by geographic boundaries. It does not make exclusions. It does not place its subjects into a pyramid, where the many poor support the few rich. It does not leave those who are not able to help themselves behind.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to a generation that is no less lost than that in which Fitzgerald lived. His fictional character, Jay Gatsby, created a world that was false; where a mirage of deception masked the fact that he was alone. All of the material possessions, all the parties, and all the popularity did not bring him abundance.

But, Christ the shepherd-king can offer those in his flock a life of abundance. In Christ there is truth: "the truth," as Kate Huey says, "is something we have a feeling for, a longing for, and we hope that the powers-that-be don't block our way to that truth."³ As our king, Jesus fights battles, but not like those that other the other kings of this world like to fight: battles to conquer enemies and

³ Kate Huey, *Weekly Seeds*

acquire new land. Jesus fights a different type of battle; a spiritual fight; against the powers of oppression and depression, evil and exclusion. Jesus fights these battles because He is the King and we are his subjects. Thus, in our faithful service to Him, we acknowledge that we are subjects, and that we choose Him as our king.

The heart of this relationship is our dependence on a ruler who holds our lives in his hands. We do not choose a ruler in the same way as we elect a president, or select a CEO or consult with a therapist. We are Christ's people, meaning that we share the same eucharistic foods, we share the same story of faith, and we stake our lives on the same hopes. In Christ there is truth – not a façade – and the truth is that Jesus is the King. He did not have to confess this before Pilate because someone in that position, with so much power and possessions, would not be looking for a king. Pilate had too much to lose to recognize the face of the truth, even when He sat right across from him.

When we are ready to be truthful with ourselves, we admit that we do not have it all. We recognize that the Pontius Pilates and Jay Gatsbys of the world do not have all that they think they have. They aren't able to recognize that they cannot fight all their battles alone, nor can they see that Christ the shepherd-king will defend them. They do not have life in abundance. They do not have life in Christ's kingdom.

Christ is our king, but not like any other king. Through our worship and service, we offer in thankful response the royal treatment that he alone is worthy to receive. AMEN.