

WHAT KIND OF KING IS THIS?

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Sunday, November 20, 2020

There was only one thing ever written about Jesus in his lifetime. Only one thing. It wasn't written by him, of course, only about him. Only one thing.

Now some when they first hear that are surprised. They often think that the Gospels were written about Jesus during his lifetime, but they weren't. They were actually written quite a while after. The earliest writing about Jesus in the Bible is probably Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It was written about the year 50, some two decades after Jesus' death. Of the Gospels, Mark is the earliest written between the years 65 and 70.

So, there is only one thing ever written about Jesus during his lifetime. Do you know what it was? It was written on a piece of board by Romans, either Pilate himself or Roman soldiers, and it was nailed to a cross, and it read, "This is the King of the Jews." Now the Gospel writers differ in their phrasing of it, but the gist is the same, "This is the King of the Jews."ⁱ

Unfortunately, this isn't a statement of faith. It was the charge against him. For some it was a joke, sarcasm used to ridicule this poor itinerant preacher, sometime carpenter with no status or position at all. It was a joke. After all what kind of king would this be, anyway?

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year. Next Sunday we start a new year with the first Sunday of Advent as we prepare for the festival of the birth of Christ at Christmas. But this week is the last Sunday of the year, Christ the King Sunday or the festival of the Reign of Christ.

It's a new festival really begun only recently in 1925, but it's

an important Sunday. After following Jesus' life throughout the year from his birth until now, it is time to look back at it all, to examine what has happened and to ask what it all meant. Where have we come out? What is our response? What is the end?

By "the end", I don't mean *final* like the end of the game or the last tick tock of time. "The end" in that sense means when it is all over and finished, but it isn't over and it isn't finished. No, by "the end" I take the sense of the *purpose*, the result of the game, the meaning of the play, the direction of the journey, the purpose of the past, present and future. "The end" in this more profound sense refers to what it all finally means and to where it is all finally leading.

Therefore, for us personally, we ask, where have we finally ended up? To where have we been led? Where are we going? To what end, what purpose, do we live?ⁱⁱ It is really two questions. Who is Jesus? And what difference does our answer make to our lives?

In answer to this we proclaim as an act of faith, and not as a joke, Christ is Sovereign. Christ reigns. The victory has been seized and we celebrate it. That's where it ends and from there we continue. We live under and for Christ.

After communism fell in eastern Europe many of the formerly Communist countries repealed laws that restricted religious worship, advertising and evangelism. The leaders of the First Methodist Church in Prague, Czechoslovakia discussed how they might respond to this new freedom. They decided to erect a large billboard. But what should they put on it? They finally decided on their message. When thousands of commuters came to work, they were greeted by the message on the billboard, "The Lamb wins."

The Lamb wins. Christ reigns. Christ is Sovereign.

When Pope Pius XI first instituted the festival of the Reign of Christ, that's the message he wanted to convey. The First World War was just over leaving 10 million dead and 20 million

wounded. Europe was in an economic depression foreshadowing the one yet to hit North America. Benito Mussolini and the fascists were on the rise in Italy as was Hitler in Germany. The festival would proclaim that there were other alternatives to power, violence and abuse. The church would proclaim a new kind of divine rule, a different kind of messiah, a different kind of sovereign, and a different example and model for human power.

Christ is the Sovereign of the Universe, the Pope said. So the feast was established as the great 'nevertheless' to the godlessness of the modern world. It was to be a witness to the world that despite the rising dictators, despite the widespread modern notion that religion was a private matter, despite our human dependence on violence and might, despite the threat of widespread economic problems, Christ is Sovereign and shall reign forever and ever. Amen.

But what kind of Sovereign is this anyway? The story from Luke seems so out of place in such a celebration. Sure, it speaks of Jesus as King, but it's only a joke. The circumstances don't seem to warrant a celebration. Victory seems to be in the hands of the high and mighty, not in the hands of the Lamb being led to the slaughter.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians and the great, early Christian hymn praising Jesus in majestic and cosmic terms seem much more appropriate. Indeed, it was written at a time in early Christian history when Jesus was seen by some teachers as only part of a hierarchy of angels. To counter this viewpoint Paul wrote in majestic and triumphant terms using the words of an old Jewish hymn about wisdom, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of creation; for in him all things were created...He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born of the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

Paul mentions the cross but, my, this is a much more lofty

and glorious picture than the stark darkness of the crucifixion.

What kind of king is this anyway?

In a discussion group on this topic, one person contrasted Jesus with human kings. "Kings are powerful; Jesus is dying. Kings take land; Jesus gives his kingdom to a thief. Kings take work from people; Jesus gives life to people. Kings have nobles at court; Jesus has tax collectors, prostitutes and cripples."

Another person challenged this view, at least of kings. He said kings are not all bad, as this comparison seems to imply. So, he made this more positive comparison. "Kings exist to protect their people; Jesus' two acts on the cross are forgiving and saving. Kings personified the nation; Jesus personified God. The people looked to their kings for protection against their nobles; the people looked to Jesus for salvation in the face of corrupt rulers. Kings demand loyalty; Jesus demands loyalty."ⁱⁱⁱ

And so, Jesus is like human kings but also unlike them. Indeed Jesus defines the word. Jesus defines what king and kingdom mean. He associates with the wrong people. He is ostracized and suspected by the right people. He subjects himself to personal poverty, homelessness, propertylessness, humiliation, physical pain and utter social rejection.

Alan Paton is a novelist who has written about the racial struggles in South Africa. In one of his novels, one of his characters named Emmanuel Nene has been terribly hurt in racist violence. When a companion expresses alarm at his injuries, Emmanuel answers: "I don't worry about the wounds. When I go up there, which is my intention, the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' and if I say, 'I haven't got any,' he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?'"^{iv}

Jesus is the kind of king who was not hungry for power and glory as the world depicts it, even though he could have that if he wanted. Jesus and God fight for something different. What God wants instead is to instill power and glory into the ordinary lives of ordinary people. To do that God needs to understand from the inside and not just from the outside. And so, by the

incarnation in Christ, God participates in our life, identifies with us, shares our creaturely condition, our "flesh."^v Through that participation, Christ fights our fights, and we are offered not just understanding but freedom, liberation from all that stands in the way of our full entry into life, abundant life, the life that God the Creator has intended for us and for all creation. As Dorothy Sayers once put it, "Jesus, for Christians, stands at the centre of God's labour for creation's salvation because God was not content to call creation good from a distance." God entered creation and made it good. God entered the human condition through Christ Jesus, who now reigns and offers us freedom and new life.

Jesus has defined what it means to be Sovereign. It means service, sacrifice and suffering in order that all things might be reconciled, in order that animosity might be ended, in order that forgiveness might be granted, in order that the good life of creation might be experienced and lived by all. The reign of Christ is not about status or affluence or prestige or self; it is about the power of the spirit, the power of love, which has conquered death itself, even death on a cross. Under his reign, that power is available to us all.

During the prime days of the struggle for racial integration in the South, black civil rights workers – 'freedom riders' they were called -- would travel on buses from city to city, challenging segregationist laws. Sometimes they were greeted with violence; often they were arrested. In one town, a bus was halted by the police and the passengers booked and jailed. While they were there, the jailers did everything possible to make them miserable and to break their spirits. They tried to deprive them of sleep with noise and light during the nights. They intentionally oversalted their food to make it distasteful. They gradually took away their mattresses, one by one, hoping to create conflict over the remaining ones.

Eventually the strategies seemed to be taking hold. Morale in the jail cells was beginning to sag. One of the jailed leaders, looking around one day at his dispirited fellow prisoners, began softly to sing a spiritual. Slowly, others joined in until the whole group was singing at the top of their voices, and the puzzled

jailers felt the entire cellblock vibrating with the sounds of a joyful gospel song. When they went to see what was happening, the prisoners triumphantly pushed the remaining mattresses through the cell bars, saying, 'You can take our mattresses, but you can't take our souls.' It was the hymn singers who were in jail, but it was the jailers who were guilty. It was the prisoners who were suffering, but the jailers who were defeated. It was the prisoners who were in a position of weakness, but it was the broken and bigoted world of the jailers and of all the Pontius Pilates of history that was perishing."^{vi}

In Jesus' lifetime only one thing was written about him, "This is the King of the Jews." In our lifetime only one thing needs to be written and that upon our hearts, "This is my Sovereign." Christ reigns in my heart and my life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 23: 38; Mark 15: 26; Matthew 27: 37; John 19: 19-22.

ⁱⁱ See William Willimon, "The End," *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, Abingdon (1984), pp. 139-140.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exchange between Anne Brizendine and Lawrence Jones in the *Sermonshop* discussion group on Ecunet.

^{iv} Quoted in Fr. Joseph Nolan, "Where are you wounds?" *Good News*, Vol. 22 (November 1995), p. 428.

^v Hall, *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

^{vi} Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, C.S.S. Publishing (1995).