

Majesty of Christ - Proper 29 (34) - November 24, 2024

2 Kings 24:8, 11–17; Psalm 47; Hebrews 1:1–9; Matthew 27:11–14, 27–37

“Rethinking the title ‘King’ ”

1. I distinctly remember the first time I saw my dad cry.
  - a. I was in third grade.
    - i. The architect building our new home in suburban Monterrey Mexico stole the money mom and dad’s they had given him for that new home in mid-construction,
    - ii. and we discovered this as the deal to sell the home where we had been living was at a point of no return.
  - b. We were looking at the potential of being homeless even though we technically owned two homes.
  - c. I didn’t understand the legal issues, but I understood his tears to signal his frustration, anguish, fear.
    - i. I was more concerned about what we were facing than about
      1. any challenge his tears could have meant against a Mexican Machismo stereotype,
      2. or how those tears could have in any way diminished the moral and spiritual strength which both my mom and dad had always embodied.
    - ii. I understood his tears, their tears, to be part of mom and dad being human.
    - iii. They were modeling yet again for me what being human meant, or could mean.
  - d. They also were modeling unconventional courage and a deep faith.
    - i. Mom and dad took the unusual and dramatic step of moving our family into that half-finished home as is, daring the court system to evict us as we pursued all other legal options.
    - ii. And you know what? We lost the lawsuit against the architect.
    - iii. But somehow we managed to hang on to and own that new home.
      1. Finishing it would be on mom and dad’s dime, basically paying for its completion a second time.
      2. But it became our family’s home, filled with wonderful memories, and mom and dad lived there for about 40 years until they passed away.
  - e. Seeing this story for its full emotional arc,
    - i. consider what a disservice I would be doing my dad if his tears had made me question his strength, his resolve, his faith, or his manhood.
    - ii. Consider what a disservice I would be doing my mom if her tears had made me doubt her love, her resilience, her intelligence, or her womanhood.
2. Picture in your minds, then, the image of our beloved Jesus in our painful Gospel lesson today,

- a. Consider the disservice we would be doing to Jesus if his silence throughout this violent chapter in his story made us doubt Jesus' power, love, courage, faith, and really his role as King.
- b. Today is the last Sunday in our Christian liturgical year.
  - i. It has been called Christ the King Sunday, but in recent years it has also been known as The Reign of Christ Sunday or the Majesty of Christ Sunday
  - ii. This Sunday as a celebration in church is not really that old
    - 1. It goes back to the early 1900s as Pope Pius XI wanted the church to make a theological statement against the forces of authoritarianism and secularism rising in Europe at the time <https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday---text=Pope%20Pius%20XI%20established%20Christ.Nazism%20soon%20to%20be%20Germany>
    - 2. Theologically it was trying to show Jesus as a different kind of King (with this scene of Jesus and Pilate) and what kind of King he would be (with the triumphal defeat of evil in Revelation)
- c. But it's fair to be scratching your head about why look at the Majesty of Christ through the lens of this particular passage
  - i. There are other passages where Jesus is being exalted, worshiped
  - ii. There are interpretations of Jesus in the Epistles where Jesus is remembered as powerful and influential
- d. I feel that we have a challenge today, but really for a long time, to contextualize what that Royal title would mean to Jesus, and what we humans want it to mean
  - i. The way Jesus reacts to the title is not the way his disciples, or others, would have wanted him to deal with it.
    - 1. The Jesus of the gospel is not one who sought power or dominion
      - a. He had a humble birth and an unremarkable growing up
      - b. And when he made himself known to others, he did so in ways that didn't seek to amass power or influence (even if people saw him as a teacher or even the Messiah)
      - c. Jesus didn't set himself up on a collision course with the Romans to remove them from the throne, though some of his followers were hoping for exactly that
      - d. The Reign of God, which Jesus preached about, wasn't going to be like the Empire of the Romans or Babylonians, or even the Kingdom of Ancient Israel – it was going to be an upside down kind of community, where those on the margins were closer to God than those in power
    - 2. Then we have the Christ of Revelation
      - a. That is the last book of the Bible
      - b. I've had it summarized to me as the story which ultimately shows that God wins over evil in the end
      - c. And in that sense, then it is good news to those suffering injustice and distress under human abuse of power
      - d. Revelation shows a triumphant Jesus, seated in heaven and returning to set things right once and for all, destroying all evil forever, establishing God's reign forever.

- ii. Both of those are biblical images (there are more) and so we get to weigh them, and opt for which one we will lean on
      - 1. As the Bible tells us and our theology explains: Jesus was fully human, fully God
      - 2. So this means we have to wrestle with a complex image of Jesus, and how Jesus meant to be an example for us
    - iii. But as you might expect, human beings throughout history, like his original followers, wanted a powerful image of Jesus, not always a docile one
      - 1. They didn't want servanthood – they wanted statehood
      - 2. They didn't want empowerment – they wanted power
      - 3. This leads to Emperor Constantine converting to Christianity to justify his expansion of empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century.
      - 4. This gives us the Crusades of knights violently returning to Palestine to be at war with the Islamic rulers of Jerusalem in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century
      - 5. I am not sure that Jesus would have recognized the movements bearing his name and fighting “in his name” as being remotely connected to his teachings of love, grace and justice for the oppressed
- 3. We have a challenge, then, to place our faith in a Jesus who is fully human and fully God, and who doesn't conform to human notions of what power or strength we want to force on him.
  - a. The temptation would be to overlook or spiritually romanticize today's passage
    - i. Grabbing instead a triumphalist option of a Jesus from Revelation which the Christian Nationalist movement would have us believe is the only “real” Jesus
    - ii. the Jesus who kicks butt,
    - iii. rather than the Jesus who cries at his friend's grave and who shares a meal with people shunned by society.
  - b. For centuries, we have been fed a lie that God's power means authoritarianism,
    - i. that Jesus' triumph over evil comes solely by way of violence,
    - ii. that the Spirit only abides in those who have experienced material success.
  - c. We read the story of the crucifixion and are faced with the difficult and uncomfortable reality that title “king” meant something different to Jesus than it does to us.
  - d. But if we stay with that discomfort, we may understand how Jesus had lived his life to arrive at this very climatic moment –
    - i. to unmask human idolatry of power and wealth,
    - ii. not just by dying an unjust death on the cross at the hand of the Romans,
    - iii. but by his resurrection as the plot twist on which our faith hinges.
- 4. The Majesty of Jesus defines power in terms of compassion and grace, defines the reign of God as the place where the peacemakers and the meek are called blessed, and challenges us to follow a leader who calls us to love, even when we have some who are trying to convince us that it would be easier to hate.