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A Different Kind of King

Rev. Dr. Philip K Mathai¹

Text: John 18:33-37

Grace mercy and peace in the name of the Father and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the kingship of Christ, it is Christ the King Sunday. But in our time and context the use of titles as kings and queens may not mean anything to us. The kings and queens we are familiar with now are all just titular heads with little or no power vested in them. We are more familiar with the titles of Prime Minister or President, depending on where one comes from. Just like kings and emperors of Jesus' time our modern day equivalents also are associated with power and dominance, or strength and subjugation.

In this context what are we to make of the gospel reading for the day? We have reached the final Sunday of the liturgical year. After Pentecost we have been in the ordinary time of the church calendar when we focused on Christian living and discipleship and this final Sunday of the church year is designated to acknowledge the eternal kingship of Christ. This particular text presents the truth of this kingship which stands in contrast to the human misunderstanding of Pontius Pilate. He could not really comprehend the truth of Jesus' authority condemns him to a deadly fate.

Jesus is brought by the Jews from the house of Caiaphas to the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judaea. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" This question by Pilate to Jesus is in all of the Gospels, but what follows in John is unique to that gospel. In the synoptic gospels or the first three gospels, Jesus responds in the affirmative, and does not say anything more. In John, however, Jesus not only offers an answer but also poses a counter question. Jesus' response to Pilate in a sense shows the inappropriateness of the question asked and also Pilate's misunderstanding of what he was asking about. As New Testament scholars are fond of saying, Jesus is on trial in the other gospels whereas Pilate is on trial in the Gospel of John.

How could we understand the kingship of Jesus? What are our perceptions of this king that we worship? Ludwig Feuerbach, the German philosopher, talks of the human understanding of the Divine as the elevation of the human nature to an infinite degree. God is seen as all knowing, all powerful and all virtuous. Regarding the kingship of Christ, although this passage from John 18 (and others like it) gives us a picture that is contrary to the expected perception of kingship, we also expect an all-powerful, all conquering Christ, who will triumph over all.

The Song of Herod from Jesus Christ Superstar voices Herod's expectations of the King of the Jews. Are not our expectations of Jesus Christ also very much in line with Herod's? We are also overjoyed to be followers of this famous person who heals cripples and raises the dead. We too ask him to prove his divinity by changing water into wine or by walking across swimming pools, or do something fantastic that will impress us and the world, or ask him for everything under the sun.

¹ Rev. Mathai is the pastor at Mt. Zion Lutheran Church, Waterloo, Ontario. This sermon was delivered on Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2015.

The kingship of Christ reminds us that the cross is central to our understanding of God revealed in Jesus Christ, it is the key to understanding who Jesus Christ really is. So, what kind of a king does the cross reveal? Do we see in the one that hangs there the fulfillment of what we aspire and long to see in a king? As the gospel reading pointed out, Jesus' kingship is not established by violence and conquest; it is not established by overpowering and dominating the other. Jesus very definitely rejects violence and conflict in the establishing of his kingdom. The glory of the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is hidden behind the suffering and the humiliation of the cross. It is love and compassion for alienated humankind that stands out rather than suspicion and doubt. It is love and compassion and a passion for justice, by identifying with human pain and suffering, that this king reveals.

As we look around, we see violence and hate in its ugliest forms being manifested around us. Recent events in Paris and Mali have shaken the sense of security and confidence and peace of people all over the world. Innocent blood has been shed and there is outrage and anger, suspicion and intolerance all around. As followers of the one who made manifest, in a very tangible way, God's love and compassion on the cross, is our tendency to retaliate in kind or in a much more violent or vicious manner? Many a times we tend to understand God's love, compassion and grace to be conditional. Many view those that are different with suspicion and anger than see God's love, compassion and grace as extending to all, as nobody being outside of its realm.

Responding to circumstances and situations, like the world, would advocate that only Christian refugees be allowed to settle in Canada; it brings forward proposals which suggest that even children of Muslims, let alone adults, should not be allowed to come to the west. It would be too risky is the argument. But the king revealed on the cross risked his very life for the wellbeing of humankind. This does not mean that security of the nation and communities be compromised, but how do we temper that with love, compassion and grace, how do we limit violence in retaliation while at the same time ensuring security and safety?

"Hey! Aren't you scared of me Christ? Mister Wonderful Christ! You're a joke, you're not the Lord. You are nothing but a fraud. Take him away. He's got nothing to say! Get out you King of the Jews! Get out of my life."² In our expectations and understanding of the kingship of Christ and in being who we are, it's not just Herod, as in the song, but we too continue to condemn the king, we too ask him to get out of our lives. Most of us either cannot relate to the kind of power implied by Christ's kingship or reject the implications of that kind of power.

Jesus, at the end, reminds Pilate and us that he came to testify to the truth and that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice. How can we understand this truth that Jesus is talking about? This truth is embodied in the king who stands feeble and condemned and powerless for the sake of others and their redemption, before Pilate. This truth and freedom are qualities of the kingdom of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ; a kingship that is characterized by the cross, which was the ultimate sign of weakness and brokenness, but now a sign of love and hope.

John Mansfield, in his play "The Trial of Jesus," pictures Pilate's wife remaining in the judgment hall long after everybody else had left. Finally, a soldier who had taken part in the crucifixion comes in, and she asks him, "Is he dead yet?" The soldier shakes his head and says, "No, lady, he is not dead." She questions him further, "But surely he is dead, he has been

² This refers to the song from Jesus Christ Superstar which is given at the end of the sermon.

hanging there so long now.” And the soldier replies, “No, lady, he is not dead. His love is let loose in the world now, and neither Jew nor Roman can stop him.”

Yes, the truth of Christ’s love, compassion and grace has been let loose, this is the truth of his kingship and it is this that we celebrate, not one that Herod and others expected of triumphalism and power, not of a superstar who impresses all, but a kingship that lets loose the power of love and grace, inviting us and gathering us to love and suffer with the suffering and those in pain. Amen.

King Herod's Song (Try It And See) Lyrics

Songwriters: Tim Rice, Andrew Lloyd-Webber

Published by: Lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., Universal Music Publishing Group

Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face to face.
You've been getting quite a name all around the place.
Healing cripples, raising from the dead.
And now I understand you're God, At least, that's what you've said.

So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're divine; change my water into wine.
That's all you need do, then I'll know it's all true. Come on, King of the Jews.

Jesus, you just won't believe the hit you've made around here.
You are all we talk about, the wonder of the year.
Oh what a pity if it's all a lie.
Still, I'm sure that you can rock the cynics if you tried.

So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool.
If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free. Come on, King of the Jews.

I only ask what I'd ask any superstar.
What is it that you have got that puts you where you are.
I am waiting, yes I'm a captive fan.
I'm dying to be shown that you are not just any man.
So, if you are the Christ, yes the great Jesus Christ
Feed my household with this bread.
You can do it on your head. Or has something gone wrong?
Jesus, why do you take so long? Oh come on, King of the Jews.

Hey! Aren't you scared of me Christ? Mr. Wonderful Christ?
You're a joke. You're not the Lord. You are nothing but a fraud.
Take him away. He's got nothing to say! Get out you King of the,
Get out King of the, Oh get out you King of the Jews! Get out of here!
Get out of here you, Get out of my life.