

Monarchy Redefined
Jeremiah 12:1-6; Luke 23:35-43
November 25, 2007

The mother of a nine-year old boy named Mark received a phone call in the middle of the afternoon. It was the teacher from her son's school.

"Mrs. Smith, something unusual happened today in your son's third grade class. Your son did something that surprised me so much that I thought you should know about it." That was not a particularly comforting thing for the mom to hear.

The teacher continued, "Nothing like this has happened in all my years of teaching. This morning I was teaching a lesson on creative writing. And as I always do, I tell the story of the ant and the grasshopper. The ant works hard all summer and stores up plenty of food. But the grasshopper plays all summer and does no work.

"Then winter comes. The grasshopper begins to starve because he has no food. So he begs, 'Please Mr. Ant, you have so much food. Please let me eat, too.' Then I say, 'Boys and girls, your job is to write the end of the story.'

Your son, Mark, raised his hand. 'Teacher, may I draw a picture?'

'Well, yes, Mark, if you like, you may draw a picture. But first you must write the ending to the story.'

"As in all the years past, most of the students said that the ant shared his food through the winter, and both the ant and the grasshopper lived. A few children wrote, "'No, Mr. Grasshopper. You should have worked in the summer. Now I just have enough food for myself.'" So the ant lived and the grasshopper died.'

"But your son ended the story in a way different from any other child. He wrote, 'So the ant gave all of his food to the grasshopper; and the grasshopper lived through the winter. But the ant died.'"

And the picture? At the bottom of the page, Mark had drawn three crosses.

In the Christian calendar, today is known as Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the liturgical year, the culmination of the message we have heard over the previous 51 weeks. If Christ is King, why are we hearing of Jesus' humiliating death on a cross? Don't kings belong on thrones with royal robes and gold crowns laced with precious jewels? Why then is Jesus stripped naked and mockingly fit with a crown of thorns? We expect kings to have security forces to protect them from harm; so if Jesus is king, where are his bodyguards?

It is helpful to have some background information about the establishment of this Sunday. The Reign of Christ Sunday is a relatively recent addition to the Christian calendar. Pope Pius XI instituted it in December of 1925. At the time, it was a powerful symbolic act. Europe was facing an uncertain future. Mussolini had been the leader of Italy for three years. A rabble-rouser named Hitler had been out of jail for a

year. The Nazi party was growing in popularity and the world lay in a great Depression. Pope Pius XI asserted that, despite all of these dictators and false values in the world, Christ was the King of the universe. Christians knew where their ultimate loyalty lay – not with dictators or power manipulators, but with Christ. Christ is our true leader, our true King – and he is unlike any earthly leaders, who will one day pass away. Christ the King Sunday was instituted as a way to theologically oppose any earthly power that would attempt to masquerade as God’s power.

Let’s go back even further in history for a moment, to the days before Jesus lived. Rome took control of the Jewish homeland in 63 BCE. For the previous hundred years, there had been a period of Jewish independence. In 40 BCE Rome appointed a king known in history as Herod the Great. When designated “king of the Jews,” Herod was in his early thirties and an outsider to traditional native aristocracy. He was a skillful military leader who gained control of his kingdom in a three year campaign. He was gifted, extravagant, and brutal. As a client king, he managed to please Rome throughout his long reign, until his death in 4 BCE, the year Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Herod lived opulently and spent extravagantly, building elegant palaces for himself in Jerusalem and Jericho, as well as several fortresses in various locations. He built a new city and port on the Mediterranean coast and named it in honor of the emperor. He financed buildings outside the Jewish homeland, including temples to the emperor. Seeking to endear himself to his Jewish subjects, he undertook a magnificent rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

Though history calls him Herod the Great, often due to his massive building projects, some Jewish voices refer to him as Herod the Monstrous. “He came to power by hunting down and killing members of a Jewish resistance movement opposed to Roman rule. Soon after he became king, he executed many of the traditional Jewish aristocracy and dispossessed their families of their land.” Later in his reign, he executed members of his own family, including three of his sons and his wife. “In his last days, aware that his subjects would not mourn his death, he ordered that a large number of Jewish notables be executed when he died so that the country as a whole would mourn. His order was not carried out.”ⁱ

It is not difficult to imagine the oppression experienced by the peasant class under Herod’s rule. The ruling elite and those who served them were about 10% of the population; the majority of people, about 90%, were members of the peasant class. The sheer expense of Herod’s lavish court and building projects was borne by the manual labor of the peasant class. With the commercialization of agriculture, peasants were driven off their family plots of land and forced to work as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or indentured slaves. Because work was seasonal, many were reduced to begging. Food and debt were the two central issues of peasant existence.

Upon Herod’s death, governance was divided among his sons. Eventually the rule of Jerusalem was placed in the hands of governors sent from Rome, one of whom was

Pontius Pilate. The temple authorities in Jerusalem were assigned the role of client rulers, thus making the high priest and others responsible for collecting and paying tribute to Rome. The temple leaders became collaborators with Roman domination.ⁱⁱ

Given this context, we can understand the longing of the Jewish people for a Messiah, for God's Anointed One who would restore the land to a righteous rule of justice with peace for all. Many saw in Jesus the potential to break the oppressive Roman rule that held them captive. He spoke about the kingdom of God in contrast to the kingdoms of this world. He painted a picture of the way the world would be if God were king. He embodied the very qualities of God, qualities of compassion, humility, and justice, qualities that were quite a contrast to the kings and their counterparts of the Roman Empire.

Jesus redefined kingship, just as the boy Mark ended the story of the ant and grasshopper in a most unexpected way. The ant gave all his food supply so that the grasshopper could live. Through his ministry Jesus taught a new way of living that turned power upside down. He used his power not to dominate, but rather to enrich the lives of all. He used his authority not to manipulate, but rather to identify with the powerless and to express solidarity with the suffering. Jesus created a community that modeled an alternative way of living. He and his companions focused their activity on healing, eating, and announcing the presence of God's Kingdom in those acts. Jesus' healing ministry offered spiritual power to those who had been disenfranchised, marginalized, and discounted. He restored them to human community and made them feel like valued members of the family of God. Given the high rate of poverty, Jesus' meal ministry addressed the very basic physical needs of people who were desperate for survival. His meal ministry was a complement to his healing ministry, for eating together was a sign of covenant friendship and solidarity. Together Jesus' acts of healing and eating with others were significant symbols of the kingdom of God breaking in, shattering the chains of oppression that caused so much dis-ease and poverty.

Jesus redefined monarchy. The One to whom the world belongs is not an oppressive dictator who manipulates power to his own advantage. The Lord of the Universe is a God who reaches out to the powerless, empowering them to overcome their desperate conditions, raising them up to new life. Christ the King is known not for domination, but by his character and conduct. Christ the King does not use others for his own glorification; he is glorified because he is committed to redeeming human life, no matter what the situation or condition. Even from the cross, he is restoring wholeness, giving hope, bearing another's burdens. On behalf of the crowd and authorities crucifying him, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." To the criminal who asks to be remembered by Jesus, he promises, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Even when abandoned by his friends and stripped of every shred of human dignity, Jesus retained his royal prerogative to give life. This is the nature of the Christly monarchy.

Hundreds of years later there was a ruling leader whose model of leadership was Christ the King. The movie, *Amazing Grace*, tells the story of William Wilberforce. He was elected to the British Parliament at the age of 21. For 20 years he persisted in seeking to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. It was finally accomplished in 1807, 200 years ago this year. Upon passage of the bill, the movie depicts a standing ovation for Wilberforce given by his colleagues. One of them remains standing to say, “When people speak of great men, they think of people like Napoleon, men of violence. Rarely do they think of peaceful men. But contrast the reception they will receive when they return home from their battles. Napoleon will arrive in pomp and power, a man who has achieved the very summit of achievement, and yet he will be haunted by the oppressions of war. William Wilberforce will return to his family, lay his head on his pillow and remember: the slave trade is no more.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we culminate the Christian year remembering Christ the King, who redefined public service. May we dare to place our ultimate loyalty with Christ the King and with the causes of compassion and forgiveness, of health and wholeness, of righteousness and justice.

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 87.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 82-91.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ken Wales and Michael Apted, *Amazing Grace*, © Walden/Roadside Attractions, 2007.

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