

Christ the King

A Sermon on Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Luke 23:33-43 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Sometimes it takes many years of puzzling over a question or issue for me to come to a better understanding of what is true and what is most important. For instance, when I was in elementary school I knew my parents were pretty different from the parents of other kids, but for many years I couldn't understand what it was that made them so different. It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties that I began to get a decent picture of the way my parents were different from most other people.

Somewhere around the age of 23 or 24 I came to realize that, along with being serious disciples of Christ, my parents were distinctive because they both happened to be pro-democracy activists. Gradually I came to realize that most guys my age did not have a father who had marched over the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Martin Luther King, Jr., advocating for voting rights for black Americans. It took a few years, but gradually I came to realize that most guys my age did not have a mother who had pushed them along the sidewalk in a baby stroller when they were toddlers, while participating in civil rights demonstrations.

Pro-democracy themes were intertwined in our family life. When I was 14 years old our family moved to Toledo, Ohio. For this particular move, my parents decided that my sister, my brother and I would take tours of the three houses that were up for consideration. Then we took turns telling our reasons for favoring one of the three houses, and finally took a vote to decide which house my parents would purchase.

This pro-democratic outlook extended to church, where my father was a United Church of Christ pastor. If you are unfamiliar with the United Church of Christ denomination, one of the important things to know is that in these churches there is lots and lots of voting. The congregation votes on just about everything you can imagine. The congregation makes the final decision about choosing a pastor. The finalist in the search process leads worship and preaches a sermon during a Sunday morning worship service. Then the congregation takes a vote in favor or against that particular candidate.

In the United Church of Christ, often referred to by the three initials 'UCC', congregations elect members to serve on a church council of some sort. This group is like our Vestry, and makes many decisions for the church, but there is a difference. St. Paul's Vestry is more like the United States Congress, in that our Vestry makes all of the financial decisions. In most United Church of Christ congregations most of the big decisions are made by the entire congregation. In a UCC church, the entire congregation has final say over the church budget. If a UCC church is trying to make a decision about replacing the roof or adding a new bathroom to the parish house the entire congregation will probably vote on the issue.

I grew up in churches where the congregation was constantly taking votes about different things. When I joined my local Episcopal Church, in 1995, I was a little perplexed when we came to a Sunday called 'Christ the King Sunday'. In the United Church of Christ congregations of my youth I'm pretty sure I never heard anyone use this phrase 'Christ the King'. In UCC churches referring to someone as a 'king' or a 'queen' might not be seen as positive. It's not that these people didn't consider Jesus to be divine or the Son of God. The issue is that the very idea of monarchy goes against the pro-democracy orientation of United Church of Christ traditions and rules.

Why do we call it Christ the King Sunday? Sometimes it takes me a few years, like fifteen or twenty years, to come to a better understanding of what is true and what is most important. That's what happened with me and my understanding of Christ the King Sunday.

As with many things in life, Holy Scripture was the thing that changed my perspective. It's not enough to read Holy Scripture. We have to gain a greater understanding of the meaning of scripture. We do this by studying and reading scripture in a community of people.

I'm pretty sure the first time I encountered this passage from the prophet Jeremiah, it seemed powerful to me, but I didn't really understand what it's about. *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.* Should we be reading this passage literally? Is God upset about the treatment of those rugged, four-footed creatures with thick wool all over their bodies? Who are the shepherds and who are the sheep? And what does this passage have to do with Christ the King Sunday?

In order to find the answers, we have to learn about the prophet Jeremiah and the time he lived in, which was about 600 years before the time of Christ. When we study Jeremiah and the time and place he lived in, we learn that the main threat to God's people was not coming from outside the kingdom of Judah. The king of Judah was corrupt. The king and all of the king's officers were bending and breaking the laws of the land. They were enriching themselves at the expense of the people. Most of the people of Judah, descendants of the original twelve tribes of Israel, were very poor and were oppressed by their rich, powerful cousins.

The people of the nation of Israel are God's flock. The shepherds are the people who have been given power and authority to watch over the flock and care for the flock. The shepherds are the king and all of the royal officers and the religious authorities.

And God is not at all happy with the way they have abused their power. *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.* God will punish those who abuse their power and hurt those who are weak and vulnerable. God will judge us in the end. This is bad news for those who rule with an iron fist, but good news for those who care for God's people.

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands....I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. God is going to raise up leaders who will actually care for the people.

Our way of looking at the world is backwards from God's way of looking at the world. We assume that kings and other leaders have the power to judge, and they should be served by those who have less power. The God of the Bible turns this assumption upside down. According to the Bible, kings are supposed to serve the people they lead. According to the Bible, kings and other leaders will be judged by God based on their treatment of the people. Leaders will be judged based on whether the people are dismayed or filled with hope. Leaders will be judged based on whether the people they are leading are fearful or joyful.

Jesus Christ is our example of a godly leader. Jesus preached to the crowds of people and they were filled with hope and joy. People were not afraid of Jesus. Jesus did not divide people into factions in order to accumulate more power for himself. Jesus was constantly giving power to others. He taught his disciples how to heal and care for the people. He shared the Good News with everyone who would listen to him.

Jesus was the kind of leader who would give up power in order to serve the people who were under his care. This is what happened at the end. At the end of Jesus' life, the religious authorities and the leaders of the Roman Empire contrived to arrest Jesus, put him on trial, make false charges against him, torture and crucify him, and then he died. This was when Jesus' kingship was revealed.

Jesus has turned the very idea of what it means to be a king upside down. Kings and other leaders are supposed to act like servants. You and I, when we are in positions of authority, are expected to act like servants.

St. Paul describes it this way. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name.*

This is why we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. God has taken our ideas of kingship and turned them upside down. Jesus Christ is the king who frees us from our fears and gives us hope. Jesus Christ is the king who served us, and tells us to serve one another.

Today we make the claim that Christ is our king, and in so doing we admit the failure of earthly rulers to bring hope and goodness to God's people. We make the claim that Christ is our king, and in so doing we proclaim that Christ's path of servant leadership is the path of Christian leadership. We make the claim that Christ is our king, and in so doing we pledge our allegiance to the Lord of love, and not to any human rulers.