

Christ the King Sunday
 November 26, 2006
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 John 18:33-37; 19:1-5; 19:12-16

Behold the Man! Behold Your King!

Today is the first Sunday after Thanksgiving, and also the last Sunday before Advent, but—on the church calendar—Christ the King Sunday: a real challenge to preachers, at least here in America. You see, here in America, we don't do kings. The delegates to the constitutional convention of 1789 decided that emphatically, and who am I to question their wisdom just because a few examples closer to home, and a little more familiarity with royal vocabulary, would make my job today easier. No way. Royalty—may it come no closer to American shores than the cover of *People* magazine. Speaking of which, however, have you ever noticed how frequently we use the term “king” in our popular culture? Just to name a few, we have:

The king of rock ‘n roll
 The king of swing
 The king of Pop
 The king of NASCAR
 King Kong
 King Cotton

And if you'll allow for a few variations on royal titles (and why not?), we also have

The Sultan of Swat,
 Jordan rules,
 and the Boss,
 and that's only for starters.

My bet is that every one of you caught at least one of my references, and that most of you caught most of them. But just in case, in order they would be:

Elvis
 Benny Goodman
 Michael Jackson
 Richard Petty
 Hollywood's most famous oversized ape
 The leading crop of the antebellum south
 The Babe
 MJ
 And Bruce

Maybe we Americans do do kings, after all.

And actually the concept of kingship embedded in our popular culture is very close to the Biblical concept of a king.

As Elvis was to all rock 'n roll thereafter, or as King Kong is to all other cinematic simians, so the king of Biblical times was to all of his people. You see, in the Bible, the king wasn't just the head of state. The king was also the one who set the standard, who made the rules, who, in his very person, defined his people. In Biblical times, as in our popular culture, people looked to the king to see what was what and what it was really all about.

And Pontius Pilate didn't really want to kill him.

The charge, at least the charge of the moment, is sedition, setting himself up as king, setting himself up as a rival to Tiberius Caesar, the emperor in Rome. That's the charge of the moment because it's the charge that really matters to Rome, and the one that can force Pilate's hand.

So Pilate has him flogged, and brought out. And he proclaims "***Behold the Man!***" In other words, "Look, here he is, isn't this enough? Isn't this enough for a man we all know is innocent?"

Behold the man. There he stands, or rather, there he wobbles because but for guards holding him up, he'd fall over. He's been beaten within an inch of his life---flogged 39 times because 40 was thought to kill a man. His lip is split; one eye is swollen shut. The blood from the crown of thorns has dried on his face, but that from the blows still runs fresh, mixing together with the soldiers' spittle. The purple robe, the crown of thorns, the bowing down before him, it's all mockery of course—as if, as if this man, ***this man in this condition***, could be king.

But of course the flogging and the sight of the beaten man isn't enough. So, sensing Pilate's reluctance, the Jewish leaders play their trump card.

"If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

And now for a moment just shift your vision slightly back this way, and take a look at Pontius Pilate.

The Presbyterian preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner casts Pilate as a worldly and world-weary careerist, struggling to kick his nicotine habit and lower his cholesterol, looking to put in a few more years so he can get his pension and retire to his timeshare on the Mediterranean. A man married to a woman who lately has been calling him in the middle of the day to report her troubling dreams.

He doesn't want to kill an innocent man. What he really wants, of course, is for this whole thing to go away. But what he really *really* wants is for no report of any of this to get back to Rome. Not a word. You see, Pilate knows how power works in this world; he has enemies as well as friends in Rome; he knows what his enemies could do with one bad report, and he knows the emperor Tiberius Caesar can be capricious, cunning, oblivious, and all too ready to sacrifice one provincial governor to the perceived political needs of the moment. So Pilate hands a man he knows to be innocent over to be executed.

But not without one final parting shot:

Pilate doesn't like to be played like this, so in his frustration and anger, he brings Jesus out once more before the crowd and says, with evident sarcasm, "Behold your king." In other words he's saying, "Here is your king. What does it say about *you* as a people that *this* man, in *this* condition is your king?"

Exactly. Behold the man. Behold your king.

What does it say about *us* that *this* man in *this* condition is *our* king.

Because he is, of course. Now I know, I know: when we think of Jesus as king, we don't usually think of him in *this* condition. When we think of Jesus as king, we think of him in his heavenly exaltation, not his earthly humiliation. And, as we look towards him in his exaltation in heaven, we're likely to hear those refrains from Handel's Messiah or from our hymns this morning: **All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall, crown him lord of all; every knee shall bow and every tongue confess—on earth and in heaven—he is the king of glory; King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he is the king of glory.**

Well and good. One day, we shall behold him just so, I hope. But for a moment let's look at the man on his last legs next to Pontius Pilate. What kind of king is this?

A king not content simply to care about his people from some majestic distance.
A king not content simply to show himself to his people on rare and special occasions.
A king not content even to disguise himself and go among them so he could find out "how they really live."

No. This is a king who, for the sake of his people, becomes one of them, and not just one of them, but a servant to all of them, and not just a servant *to* all of them, but a servant who suffers *for* all of them. And what does he suffer? A horrible, unthinkable death.

Crucifixion is essentially death by asphyxiation. You suffocate under your own weight as you hang there, as your lungs slowly, inexorably fill up with your own bodily fluids. And yet as horrible, as unthinkable, as this suffering is for him, there is still worse.

His worst suffering, his very worst, is the thought that this act, this kingly act, this inconceivable divine act of love and self-sacrifice might be in vain, to no avail, entirely without effect. And so there, on the cross, betrayed, beaten, bloodied, and dying, he uses all of what little strength he has left, pushes himself up and inch or two, fills what's left of his lungs with the stinking, fetid air of the garbage dump, and doing all he can to make himself heard over the caws, the moans, and the jeers, cries out—what? “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”

Behold the man. Behold your king.

Because that's what I need to tell you on this Christ the King Sunday: he is the exalted king in heaven precisely because of this humiliation here on earth. It is the earthly humiliation that shows us the unfathomable depth, breadth, and majesty of His heavenly love. It is the earthly humiliation that reveals God to be God, and no mere human being. It is the earthly humiliation that shows us what one king, and only one king could do, would do, did do, is doing, and will yet do—for us. He is the king of glory, the lord of lords, the king of kings, he is crowned lord of all, and the angels fall before him, because he has done *this*, suffered *this*. On earth. For us.

Imagine that we're back there, at the back of the crowd, doing our best to not be seen and yet still to see what's going on. (We'd probably find a few other disciples back there doing the same thing.) Imagine for a moment that we're looking up at Pilate and the wobbling Jesus. And imagine a stranger, a passerby, coming along, and, taking in at a glance the horrible, all-too-familiar inhumanity of the scene, whispering to us, “For God's sake, who's in charge here?”

What could we say? We could only point and say “Him.” And then we would have to say: “No, no, not him, but *him* the one on the right—the beaten, bloody one about to fall over. He's the one in charge. He's the king. He's our king. He's God with us.”

And if the stranger were to look at us in disbelief and say, “How did your king—your God, no less—get like that?” What could we say?

We could say that he got like that because of cruelty and ignorance, because of petty ambition and worldliness on the part of a few, bloodlust on the part of some, and inhumane indifference on the part of still more. He got like that because of greed and treachery, and fear and cowardice. And there would be some truth to all of that.

Or we could say that he got like that because he *chose* to, because in the words of the old translations, he set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaited him there. And there would be more truth to that.

Or we could say that he got like that because this has all been part of the divine plan from the very beginning, what C.S. Lewis called the deep magic from across the sea, or what Paul called the mystery of the ages revealed in Christ Jesus. And there would be even more truth to that.

Or we could simply say: ““For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” That is how he got like that.”

And that, I think, would be the truth.

And then only one question would remain, but it’s a big one: How do we live in, and live up to, this love?

As the church, we are the people of God, the body of Christ. We are the ones who live here and now under the rule of this king. This king Jesus is the one who sets the standard, who makes the rules, who, in his very person, defines us as a people. We are to look to him to see what’s what and what it’s really all about. So how do we do this?

It’s a big question, **the** question of Christian ethics, in fact; far bigger than I can handle here or anywhere else. . . . But say at least this much:

As the church, as those who live under the kingship of Jesus Christ here and now,
 We must be
 A friend to the friendless,
 A home to the homeless,
 An advocate for those who have no advocate, and
 Hope for those who have no hope.

Why?

Because when we were friendless, homeless, with no advocate and without hope, he became such for us. Such was, and is, his heavenly, kingly, and earthly love.

And all he said was this: “This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you.”

So go back now just one more time, and behold the man. Look at him again, being held up there next to Pontius Pilate. Is that our king? Is he the one who sets the standard, who makes the rules, who defines us? Do we look to him to see what’s what and what it’s really all about? Or do we, like Pilate, look off to some distant, merely earthly power in the mistaken belief that that power really does have ultimate power over us?

Behold the man. Behold your king.

Amen.