

Long Live the King!

Nov. 21, 2004

Jeremiah 23: 1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

This is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. It's also Christ the King Sunday. So, naturally, I started thinking, about thankfulness and about the reign of Christ, and about the world we live in. It is a world of stark contrasts: On the one hand we are thankful today--thankful that we live in a free country (the richest country in the world), thankful that we have enough food to eat, and that we have homes to live in. On the other hand we are saddened because we know that even in our country people go hungry and sleep in the streets, and that conditions are even worse in much of the world. It is easy for us, on the one hand to hail Christ as king when we have comfort and full tummies, but not so easy on the other hand, when we see so much suffering all around. On the one hand we have the most powerful army, the most powerful weapons in the world. On the other hand we are frightened by the thought of terrorists, fearful for our soldiers, and distressed by mounting deaths of coalition troops and insurgents and innocent civilians.

In the face of this contrast, what does it mean to say that Christ is king? On the one hand many of us are immensely happy and relieved that the president was reelected. On the other hand many of us are immensely unhappy and upset that the president was reelected. Does the kingship of Christ have anything to do with our political situation? Are we destined to remain divided, with each camp claiming that Christ is on our side?

And, on the face of it, our New Testament texts today only add to our perplexity. On the one hand, in Colossians, we have a beautiful hymn about the glory and majesty of Christ. Listen again to just part of this description of Christ: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation,...in him all things were created...He is the head of the body, the church, in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." A king? Yes, and more than a king! On the other we have the story of Christ's crucifixion. Here is a man being dying on a cross--the most painful and degrading method of execution the Romans could devise. People are laughing at him, saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." Ironically there is an inscription over his head reading, "King of the Jews." If we'd been there, we'd have read that sign and said, "King of the Jews, I don't think so!"

How can we reconcile these two opposing views of Jesus Christ? How can we make sense of the view that the glorious Christ and the man suffering on the cross

are the same king? Only one man, a convicted criminal hanging on a cross beside Jesus, solved the riddle. Only he saw that Jesus' kingdom was an eternal one. Only he saw that Jesus' kingdom was far greater than the Roman empire. "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom," he said. The writer of Colossians understood, too, Look at his final verse: "Through him to reconcile to himself all things...making peace through the blood of his cross" In the world's eyes it makes no sense, but the King of the world saves us, not by riding in on a white horse, not by an exercise of might, but by dying for us, by acting in love. And if we can solve the riddle, if we can understand the paradox, it will help us in the contrasts, the dilemmas we face today.

Let's look at what this would mean for us, for the way we live our lives.

First we have really to get it through our heads that ours is a King of love, who does not and will not resort to force. "Not by might, not by power, but by Thy spirit," the scripture says. We just don't understand this way of thinking. We really believe that, if we use enough force, spend enough money, or overpower the other side with our arguments, we can win. In spite of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, in spite of his words in scripture, we just don't believe his way would work. And yet, years ago Charlemagne said, "Caesar, Alexander, and I built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon might. But Jesus built an empire on love and that empire has lasted for a thousand years." Now we can make that two thousand years and counting. What would our world be like if we took Jesus' commandment to love--put into practice Jesus' way of love in our lives? Wouldn't we work harder to share with the poor and the hungry? If we began to love those who were different, wouldn't we fear them less? I'll suggest something even more radical--wouldn't we begin to try to understand and listen to those whose political views differed from ours? What a radical idea--Christian Democrats and Christian Republicans actually trying to understand one another! We need to stop demonizing people we disagree with and begin to working toward wholeness and healing. As a pastor friend says, "Jesus didn't transform people by throwing stones. People responded to Jesus because he loved them as no one ever had before." Remember the words of the hymn, "Not with swords loud clashing, nor roar of stirring drums. With deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes." We need to remember that ours is a King of love.

Second, we need to get it through our heads that the Christ's kingdom is more important and more lasting than any government, even our own. Listen to this story:

A king called all of his wise men and counselors together for a meeting. He addressed them and said; "I want you to go and think, read, and research. Consult the wisest and most learned men in the land. Spare no expense."

"I want you to find the ONE statement that will get me through all situations in life. Whether I am on top of the world or in the pits, find that statement."

"I don't want to learn long and complicated philosophies. I want one simple statement. Find it or write it; I don't care, just bring me the statement."

The men left and consulted for months. They finally returned and handed the King a scroll.

The King unrolled the scroll. On it was written four words.

"THIS TOO SHALL PASS"

That was it.

The wise men explained.

When you are on top of the world, that is but a fleeting moment, things change, always remember, this too shall pass.

When you are in the pits, all nights are followed by day, at your lowest moments remember also, this too shall pass.

All external circumstances and material things change.

No matter what your circumstances, remember,

THIS TOO SHALL PASS!

The wise men reminded the great King that this would get him through his earthly things but the truly wise knew there were things beyond this earth and life. . Things that were eternal.

True wisdom, they reminded the King, was in the ability to recognize the fleeting temporal things of the material world from the truly eternal things.

O Great King they said, "Most of the things that you worry or gloat about are temporary, and our four words apply."

For most of your situations. . . **THIS TOO SHALL PASS!**

So, for you who are happy about the election, remember--even this presidency will last only four years. Even this government, like all governments, is temporal. This too shall pass.

And, for you who are sad about the election, remember--even this presidency will last only four years. Even this government, like all governments, is temporal.

This too shall pass.

But, as the Hallelujah chorus proclaims. He shall reign for ever and ever!

Christ's kingdom is more important and more lasting than any government, even our own.

The third thing we need to get through our heads is that God's ways are not our ways. This is the source of our hope. One pastor asserted, "God can make a way where there is no way." God has a way of using people and events in ways that we could never imagine. Let me share a story. After Jim Bakker, the evangelist, had fallen into sexual misconduct, the ministries in the PTL Club were in disarray. Everything was falling apart and to highlight the destruction of Bakker's kingdom there was a bankruptcy auction of all the stuff that Bakker had accumulated over the years. There were many things that were sold, including an air-conditioned doghouse, but what was of special interest was the sale of Jim Bakker's desk. A man had flown down from Toronto Canada, to bid on the desk, and it was obvious from the beginning that this man was going to buy this desk, no matter what. When the auctioneer's hammer slammed down and he shouted the word, "Sold!" one of the TV reporters got hold of the man and asked him why he was willing to travel so far and pay so much for that desk. The man's response was memorable.

"This may look like a desk to you," the man answered. "But it's much more than that to me. You see, five years ago my wife and I got a divorce. We had created tremendous hurt for each other and there was no way that the marriage could continue, so we went our separate ways. Then, about a year ago, I got a telephone call from her and she told me she was down here in North Carolina. She had just spoken to a man named Jim Bakker who had given her hope. She wanted to know if I would come down and join her because she was convinced that, if I would listen, we could get our marriage together again.

I flew down here as quickly as I could. My wife and I sat on one side of this desk while Jim Bakker sat on the other side and explained to us the healing power of Christ's love. He told us that in Christ we could have a new beginning. That day I made a decision to follow Jesus, as my wife had done the day before. And though it has taken a lot of work, our marriage has been restored, our lives were renewed and everything changed."

"Mister!" said the man, "This may look like a desk to you, but to me it's an altar. It's the place where I committed my life to Christ. To me, it's a sacred piece of furniture, and I just couldn't stand the thought that it might fall into the hands of someone who wouldn't appreciate what it is to me."

The truth is that, while there is bad in the best of us, God can find good in the worst of us and use that good in ways we couldn't imagine. When we look at the mess the world is in it is hard for us to say all things work together for good to

those who love God. On the other hand, if God could bring good--not just good, but the redemption of the world out of the ignoble execution of his Son, then how can we doubt? God's ways are not our ways.

What a strange King--a king who loves, rather than wielding power, a king whose kingdom is eternal, rather than temporal, a king whose ways always amaze and surprise us and give us hope. Now that is something to be thankful for!

We pray to this King and his father every Sunday: "Thy kingdom come." Do we mean it? Are we willing to work, to love, to make this kingdom a reality on earth, as well as heaven?

Some years ago, Bobby Richardson, the famous New York Yankee second baseman, offered this prayer. He said, "Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen."

We too, can do that. Just make Christ king -- put him on the throne of your heart -- and learn to pray: "Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen."