

Pictures of the King

My daily planner tells me that there are five weeks left in this Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Nine. Another calendar that I use on a regular basis, however, tells me that this is the last week of the year. By the Church Calendar used by Christians for centuries, the year begins with Advent, the four week period of celebration and contemplation leading up to Christmas. By that reckoning, today is the last Sunday of the year and since 1925 many Christians have celebrated the last Sunday of the liturgical year as Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. The passages of Scripture selected for today by the Revised Common Lectionary give us what appear to be some radically different pictures of the Christ-King. We read parts of one of them together as our Call to Worship and I've just read two more for you from the visions of the prophet Daniel and from the Gospel According to John. I'd like for us to consider those apparently contradictory or at least disparate portraits of the King and see if they don't in fact lead us to a fuller picture, one in which the differing elements of each add up to a greater and inspiring harmony. Even in a country which threw off its monarchy over 200 years ago, I think that this image of Jesus as King still has the ability to guide and to comfort us as we seek to walk in a way that gives honor to our Creator and brings healing to the Creation.

The passage from which most of our Call to Worship this morning was derived is Psalm 132, one of the Psalms of Ascent which Dick Gibson mentioned to us in Sunday School as we looked at pictures of the remnants of the stairs to the Temple in Jerusalem. These Psalms were sung by pilgrims to Jerusalem on the great feast days as they climbed Mount Zion and the steps to the Temple. Psalm 132 may be one of the earliest – there is some evidence that it was composed for Solomon's placement of the Ark of the Covenant into the First Temple. In part, it is a celebration of Solomon's father, David, and the ruling dynasty which he began. Originally, it reflected the confidence of the people of Israel that David and his line had been blessed by God and that an heir of David would rule over them and their land forever more. The pilgrims who sang this song as they went to that First Temple, built by Solomon, expected that the ones who fulfilled the promise of an ongoing Davidic monarchy would be typical of the kings they knew in their own land and in neighboring kingdoms – warriors and lawgivers. They hoped they would be wise and gentle, devoted to God and successful in their endeavors, but they probably knew that even the best royal family produces at least an occasional rotten apple. If they didn't know it at the beginning, they certainly didn't have to wait many generations to find out. But the song pointed toward a benevolent despot, a human king with all of his human strengths and failings, nothing more or less.

The Babylonian Exile, of course, meant a radical redefinition of this Psalm, along with so much else that the faith of the Children of Israel had held dear. The Temple destroyed, the family of David dead or in exile, a succession of foreign kings in power over the land and the people. Even when the Temple was rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah by the order of the Persian King Cyrus, there was still no king of David's line on the throne. Now the words of Psalm 132 began to mean something else for the people – the return of the King. He would be one selected by God – the Hebrew term was Messiah or, later in Greek, Christos – The Anointed One. They expected that he would rally the people to throw off their foreign overlords, restore the glories of Israel under David and Solomon and usher in a new and lasting era of prosperity. The promise of the Psalm was now understood to be about an idealized King for Israel – idealized but human nonetheless. The arrival of the Messiah was awaited eagerly by generation after generation.

Pictures of the King

The Book of Daniel, and especially the passage I read earlier, likely came out of the centuries of disappointment which accompanied the expectation of the Messiah. The Babylonians who had conquered Judah and destroyed the Temple had been replaced by the Medes and the Persians, who had in turn been replaced by the Greeks under Alexander as the great power of the Middle East and the overlords of Israel. The troubles of the Jewish people waxed and waned depending on the character of these foreign kings and their appointed lieutenants. The persecution under one Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes, was particularly egregious. He banned the worship of Yahweh, had a statue of Zeus set up in the Temple in Jerusalem and had a pig sacrificed to it – the animal considered most unclean by the Jews. Some scholars believe that it was during this period that the Book of Daniel was written. It is an example of apocalyptic literature, a genre which uses symbolic language to comfort people in present difficulty by showing the ultimate victory of God in the future. The apocalyptic language of Daniel reinforced the general understanding of and thirst for a Messiah. Still, the passage promised an earthly king. The phrase “Son of Man” which Jesus later used to refer to himself simply meant human being, rather like C.S. Lewis’ use in the Chronicles of Narnia of the phrases “Son of Adam” and “Daughter of Eve.” So, while this human who would defeat Israel’s enemies might be sent by the Ancient of Days, that is, Yahweh who had existed from before time, we are still looking here at the picture of a traditional warrior-king, albeit again an idealized one. The kingdom would have been expected to have been won and kept through military might by a dynasty of strong and righteous kings. As the angel explains the vision to Daniel later in the chapter, “The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.”

It is nearly impossible, then, to imagine a less likely figure than Jesus of Nazareth being hailed as the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Christ. As John relates in chapter six and in chapter twelve of this Gospel, Jesus has twice been hailed by the crowd as king and twice he has slipped away from them, refusing to lead the expected insurrection. He continually tells his disciples and those he’s healed not to tell others of his miraculous powers or their conviction that he is the Messiah. At last, he is taken prisoner, betrayed by one of his closest followers. By the time he appears before Pilate at the Praetorium, he has already been derided by the priests who should have welcomed the Messiah, struck in the face by their guard. The man Pilate sees is a simple Galilean peasant, a wandering rabbi who is in disgrace with his own people. It is hard to believe that this representative of the power of Rome takes at all seriously his question to Jesus: “Are you the King of the Jews?”

I’ve always thought that the lyrics of Tim Rice and the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber for “Jesus Christ Superstar” were particularly apt for this scene, especially as realized on the original album of the work by baritone Barry Dennen, who also played Pilate in the subsequent film. Pilate is portrayed with an upper class British accent, our era’s auditory signature of the ruling class. Dennen’s performance and Rice’s words combine to give us a mental picture of the Roman governor looking down his patrician nose at the bedraggled figure presented to him. “Who is this broken man cluttering up my hallway? Who is this unfortunate?” “Someone Christ, King of the Jews,” comes the mocking answer of the working class soldier.

Pictures of the King

But neither Pilate nor his soldier nor the priests nor the crowds nor even his disciples understand that in Jesus they have a true king, though one vastly different from their expectations. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus tells the questioning Pilate. Not from this world or not of this world, as many translations put it. Either, it seems to me, is correct. The kingdom of Jesus is not from this world – no earthly priest anointed him as king over Israel; his father, Joseph, though descended from David, had not been a king but a carpenter; no earthly army had placed Jesus on the throne. Instead, those who believe in Jesus understand that his authority came from God. And Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. This world’s kingdoms, like the Roman Empire which Pilate represented, stand for, in the words of an anonymous commentary, “greed, status, ruthlessness, rule by intimidation, power, and the willingness to use it.” The commentary reflects further on the words of Jesus, “My kingdom is not of this world”: “He is saying that in the midst of the kingdoms of this world--the kingdoms of greed, status, ruthlessness, intimidation, and power--there stands a kingdom of justice, truth, goodness, and peace. To the rule of intimidation, to the street sense of dishonesty and deceit, to the pursuit of power and possessions, to the way of life that does what is desirable and expedient, there is an alternative--the rule of grace and truth. This kingdom is God’s kingdom, revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

To the characterization of the rule of Jesus as the rule of grace and truth, a commentator whom I often find helpful, Robert Linthicum, adds the role of love. “What Jesus is actually saying in this response to Pilate is: “My kingdom is not made up of the values, structures and people of Rome’s political, economic and religious systems which are designed to oppress, exploit and dominate society for its own wealth and power. If my kingdom were this kind of society, committed to dominate and control the people, then of course my followers would rise up in revolt and seek to overthrow you by force. But my kingdom is not that kind of kingdom. It is a kingdom totally outside your capacity to understand, Pilate, because you understand power only as being unilateral and dominating, and you do not understand the power of relational love in community.”” Linthicum’s analysis is particularly in tune with the Gospel According to John, it seems to me. It is in John’s Gospel, you may remember, that Jesus impresses the core of his teaching on his disciples on their last night together with what he calls “a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Just as the angel told Daniel in his vision that the dominion would be given not to one King but to “the Holy Ones of the Most High,” so Linthicum points to the “not of this world” kingdom of Jesus as being linked to the community created by love, the Beloved Community of God.

This idea of the kingdom of which Jesus is king being founded on love is echoed by our fourth picture of the King this morning. Listen to a portion of the reading from the Revelation of John which is listed in today’s lectionary, from the first chapter, picking up in the middle of verse four: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” My sisters and brothers, we are the kingdom, a kingdom of priests, serving our God and Father. We are the ones whom the psalmist foretold in

Pictures of the King

the song we spoke together in the Call to Worship – priests clothed with salvation, the faithful who shout for joy because of our King.

When Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, he did not mean that it would not impact this world, that it would not be lived out in this world – quite the contrary. The kingdom of Jesus, the kingdom of God or of Heaven, in the words of the other Gospels, is not of this world by virtue of not being oriented by the values and ways of this world. Instead, it is oriented to the values of God and to the Way of Jesus. But as members of the Kingdom of Jesus, we are called to walk in his Way in this world, to bring the world Jesus' message of love and hope and freedom. Michaela Bruzzese wrote for *Sojourners* magazine, "As heirs to Jesus' kingdom, we are commissioned to bring the good news to this world daily, in acts large and small, public and private. We are ambassadors of the new reign, privileged to share the mercy, love, peace, and justice of Christ with the world."

Heirs to the Kingdom – think of that! Paul's letter to the Romans teaches that we are joint-heirs with Christ. As joint-heirs, as the Body of Christ in this world, we carry the same mission that Jesus carried: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We may feel at times that we are inadequate to the task. Like Moses or like Jeremiah, we may protest to God that we are slow of speech, or too young, or perhaps too old or not important enough. And yet, the promise that we are heirs to the Kingdom carries with it the promise of great power. Oh, not power the way the world often thinks of it, not the power that Pilate understood, or even the priests of Jerusalem but, as Bruce Epperly writes, the "types of power that heal rather than destroy, include rather than exclude, and inspire rather than dominate." This power is available to us and, even if the world does not understand it, it sometimes recognizes it. There are politicians both local and national who are suddenly very interested in what the churches have to say – some of them, hopefully, because they share our Kingdom mission but most of them, I suspect, because they recognize that we have power, even when they do not understand it. We must not be afraid to exercise our power, the power that is ours through King Jesus, because it is a power of love and grace and truth, a power that heals and includes and inspires. Whenever we have the opening to use this loving power in the cause of the Kingdom of Jesus, the Beloved Community, then we must speak up, we must point away from the way of domination and toward the way of peace, we must use what power we have on behalf of the least of these, our brothers and sisters.

Jesus may not have been the kind of king that the psalmist expected but as it turns out, he was the king that he predicted: Son of David, the one through whom God has made God's habitation with us forever, the one who has caused us to be blessed with the Bread of Life, with salvation and with joy. Jesus may not have been the kind of king that the author of the Book of Daniel expected, either, but he is the Son of Man blessed by the Ancient of Days, sent from the very throne room of God, to whom all peoples owe allegiance, whose kingdom will never pass away. Pilate may not have believed that this "someone Christ" was King of the Jews but as Jesus told Pilate, he testified to the truth and those who belong to the truth hear his voice. The Kingdom of Christ is not a kingdom that the world understands or even recognizes most of the time but it is the Kingdom to which we belong, you and I, as we seek to follow the will of God in our lives

Pictures of the King

and to walk in the Way of Jesus in this world. Our King is not like other kings. His throne sits upon the Cross and we must walk in the way of the Cross to live in the power of the Kingdom. Our King does not rule by fear and domination but by love and liberty. Our King is not a mighty warrior; he is the one who rode on the donkey's colt, the one who was captured and beaten and scourged and crucified. Our King is not wise after the way of the world; he is the embodiment of the foolishness of God. And yet, he is great, and he is called the Son of the Most High, and God has given him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Thanks be to God!