

Jesus Christ is King

A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2018

St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

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John 18:33-37

Today we celebrate that Jesus Christ is King. If you only had four words to summarize the entire message of the Bible, those would be the four words. This day is the last day on the church calendar. In some ways, this is the day to which all other days on the church calendar have been pointing. The cross and resurrection, Good Friday and Easter, are undoubtedly the event on which all of human history turns and the events from which all of human history finds its meaning. But this day isn't like those days. This day isn't the remembrance of a specific day in human history. This day is the celebration of the goal of human history because God the Father created humanity to rule over his creation, and when Jesus Christ sat down at the right hand of God as Lord and King, humanity fulfilled its vocation. To help us better understand this, let me make a few points about Christ the King Sunday.

First, this day is not a celebration of the future or the past but the present. This day is not a celebration of the day that Jesus was enthroned, that's Ascension Day, nor is this a celebration of some future event still to come in God's plan when Jesus will be made king. I get the impression that this type of theology was not a prevalent in the Episcopal church as it was in the tradition within which I grew up, but there is a system of thought in some forms of American Christianity that Jesus isn't king now, but he will be one day in the future. He'll return, set up a physical kingdom on earth, and only then can we say that Jesus is King. Contrary to this position, today we celebrate the fact that Jesus is already King, right now, in the present, because he is sitting at the right hand of God as the world's true Lord and King.

Second, this day is not a celebration that Jesus rules in Heaven but not on earth. It may take the church a generation to break the Church out of our Platonic mindset and reading of Scripture, but when it happens, we will finally be able to read the Bible freshly and (W)rightly. We tend to think that the goal of the Christian life is to go to Heaven when you die. This language is used everywhere in Christianity. But this is kind of like confusing your layover destination with your final destination. For example, I'm going with the Bishop to California next month, and I'm going to lay over in Dallas and catch a flight to Los Angeles. I'd better get to Dallas, right? No one's saying that arriving safely in Dallas on this trip isn't essential, but it's not my final destination. That's Los Angeles. In the Bible, Heaven is our layover. The New Heavens and New Earth are our final destination.

And because we're so stuck in this mindset that this place is bad, that place is good, and I can't wait to get out of this place and go to that place, we forget that heaven is supposed to come to earth, and not the other way around. And then, as a result, we interpret Jesus to mean things that no Jew in the first century could have said. Take our reading this morning.

"So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is" and here the ESV says "not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." When you translate these words like this, it's because you are convinced that Jesus can't possibly mean what he's actually saying. What it sounds like Jesus is saying is "My kingdom isn't on earth, my kingdom is in heaven. I have nothing to do with this place, and I'm no threat to your rule or Caesars." Except, that's not what Jesus says. What he says is this.

“My kingdom is not *from* this world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου). If my kingdom were *from* this world (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου), my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not *from here* (ἐντεῦθεν).” Jesus isn’t saying that his kingdom has nothing to do with this world. He’s saying that his kingdom is coming from another place to this world. And if you think I’m crazy, if you think I’m so far off on this that I should stop now, then read the Gospel of John and read early church history.

In the Gospel of John, one person calls Jesus King in chapter one, and then in chapter twelve the crowd shouts, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” And then, in chapter 18, Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, and from that point on Jesus is referred to as King no less than twelve times in the next two chapters. Jesus never says, “No, no, I’m no threat to you. I’m no threat to Caesar. Let me go. I’m a king of a different kind of place” because that wouldn’t have made any sense. The kingdom of God was always supposed to come from heaven to earth, and Jesus is claiming before Pilate to be the King of that Kingdom. And this applies to the early martyrs as well. When they said that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not to their peril they understood that Jesus’ kingship wasn’t only a heavenly kingship but a kingship that united heaven and earth and stood in opposition to any other claims to be the world’s true Lord.

So, Jesus Christ is King not just of heaven, but of heaven and earth, and that means that what we celebrate today had direct implications for what happens when we walk out those doors today. And that’s my final point. Both Jesus and the people who killed him, and the early martyrs and those who killed them, understood that to say Jesus is King meant something and that it might cost something. One of my favorite songs contains the lyrics “My first allegiance is to a king and a kingdom.” That is very easy to say, very easy to sing, and very easy to celebrate on a day like today, but it is also very easy to forget as soon as we walk out those doors.

The simplistic application of this is how closely so many people in this country have bound up their identity with whether they're an R or a D, but that really is too simplistic. It might be the hot button topic of our time, but there are far more things in our lives that compete for our allegiance than just political parties or politicians. I say, "I'm an Apple guy" far more than I say, "I'm a Christian." In most of my conversation with my friends, I'm far more interested in talking about the Marvel Cinematic Universe than I am talking about theology or asking my friends how I can pray for them. And maybe those are bad examples. There's nothing inherently wrong with being an Apple guy or being a fan of the MCU, but Jesus Christ is King, and that's got to mean something because people have died for it. Jesus died for it. So, celebrate today that Jesus Christ is King right now, in the present, of heaven and earth, and when we're done, go out those doors and give those words meaning.

Amen