

Jesus Condemned

It's a bit hard to preach on this without just preaching the same basic message I have the last several Sundays. Maybe that's OK. Maybe that's where God is leading me because it's important enough to do so.

Jesus ends up on trial as the King of the Jews. He is mocked and tortured with a crown of thorns under that accusation. Under Roman law, claiming to be a king...a rival to the Emperor...is sedition...a capital crime.

We as Christians claim Jesus now rules over all heaven and earth. We talk about Jesus as king. We even sing it – Jesus shall reign where ere the sun...does its successive journey run.

Christian Nationalists will say Christ is King. I believe they mean something different from what that means to me. I think for them, and really for a lot of Christians in general, claiming that Christ is king means making him fit the emperor mold.

I've been thinking a lot about this business of kingship over the last few weeks. I've begun to wonder whether saying Christ is king is really all that helpful.

Jesus is accused of claiming to be King of the Jews. The priests reject that notion entirely and want him dead. When given the option, the priests say, "we have no king but the Emperor."

Talk about apostasy. That's about as blasphemous as a Jewish person can get...and Jesus is the one on trial?!

Jesus in fact never calls himself a king. All he really said was my kingdom is not from this world.

At a minimum, the kind of king Jesus is lays ruin to all the normal human understandings of what it means to be a king.

When I've asked kids in confirmation classes what they think of when they think of a king, they're often pretty complimentary. A king looks out for their people. Protects them and sees to their welfare.

History however suggests otherwise. Kings have more often been about their own power and their own status. Israel itself experienced that under their own kings.

And after they were conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, when they returned home, they were occupied by one oppressive ruler after another.

For the most part, kings have not come out well in the Bible. And honestly often not in the rest of world history either.

Early in Israel's history they were a loose confederation of tribes led by people called Judges. Most of the judges were corrupt and there was no strong central leader to provide protection. So the people asked their prophet Samuel to ask God to give them a king.

But here's the thing...as a people called to represent God to the nations, God was supposed to be their king. Their relationship with God was supposed to shape them and in doing so shape the world. But that seemed too fragile to them, so they kept asking for a king.

Here's what Samuel told them:

"These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle^[a] and donkeys and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day."

But the people were adamant that a king was what they needed. So God granted them what they asked. And of course, Samuel ended up being right.

Now, here is Jesus...behold your king. We've come full circle. Here is the chance for God to be king again.

What I have preached virtually my whole career is that we do claim Jesus as our king...but Jesus as king is completely different than any other king.

His kingdom is an upside-down kingdom...a kingdom where healing and forgiveness and love...true shalom...are the foundation.

I don't think that's wrong. But I'm beginning to doubt that's the best way to think about it. I think we humans are mostly unable to handle kings or kinglike rulers...safely.

So now I'm asking myself, what good is a king?

Obviously, most of the world has moved on from royal rulers. But we still sometimes put too much faith in presidents and other leaders. Especially in tumultuous times.

In the 1950's, a group of psychologists studied how it could be that so many people supported the Nazis. They identified what they described as an authoritarian personality. These are folks who need the rigid law and order promised by authoritarian rulers to feel safe.

According to these researchers, they value obedience and have a deep respect for social hierarchies and authorities. They defend their place in the social hierarchy and look down on those they perceive as beneath them. They tend to see the world as starkly either-or and are disdainful of any perceived weakness or vulnerability. They like kings and king-like rulers.

So maybe we should take Jesus' refusal to identify himself as a king seriously. I go back to my question, what good is a king?

Kings act from outside of us. They rely on laws and strength and when needed, power over their subjects to control them.

Jesus on the other hand works on the inside of us. His teaching and his self-giving love are meant to transform us...to change our hearts.

Maybe the real end of mature faith is to recognize that God is within and we don't need a king.

Paul actually knew this. In his letter to the Galatians, he wrote, I have been crucified with Christ, ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

This idea of Christ who lives in me maybe doesn't seem solid enough to make the world safe...so we fall back on the promise of a strong ruler who will save us in the way we've come to expect rulers to act.

In John 3, Jesus said And **this is the judgment**, that **the** light has come into **the** world, and people loved darkness rather than light.

When we say Christ rules in our lives, we don't mean the kind of authoritarian rule that relies on fear. There is judgement to be sure. But that judgement is what we bring on ourselves when we choose the dark...when we choose the emperor.

Jesus is the light...the life. But the priests chose darkness because it seemed safer.

John paints Pilate as being conflicted...he's almost a little sympathetic. Jewish historians do not – they are clear that Pilate is the villain.

But in the end it doesn't matter – both the priests and Pilate chose the power of empire over what Jesus was really about.

The narrative effect of our readings these last few weeks is to put us in the same position as Peter, as Caiaphas, as Pilate, and as the priests. We too are on trial.

Which power will we choose? Will we choose light? Or darkness? Jesus? Or whatever human power we think will keep us safe?

It is not easy to see the good news in this passage. It's there of course...or it will be when we get to the end of this story. Pilate, Caiaphas, the priests....none of them will get the last word.

But in this last bit of Lent, the questions raised by Jesus' trial are worthy of our own times of reflection. Who and what do we really put our faith in?