

Jesus, A Different Kind of King

At the end on each church year we celebrate the kingship of Christ—declaring the risen Jesus to be in the words of Handel’s masterpiece the Messiah: King of kings and Lord of lords. Yet often in our daily lives we have many things which seem to be the true lords or rulers of our lives—things which truly rule our thoughts and actions as we make our choices and decisions each day. In the two of the three readings from scripture today we have images depicting God; images giving us impressions about God’s nature and throne; you might say God’s place of residence. The little bit we have from Daniel is only a small portion of that description and many of the ones which we have incorporated into modern day images are drawn from those recorded there. When we come to this Sunday, the texts before us remind us that the question before us from scriptures, especially the gospel reading from John taken from the trial scene before Pilate is always this one: Who is truly powerful? Who reigns? Within the gospel narratives the question always being posed was about Jesus’ identity. Who was this man? By whose authority did he do the things that he did? Within our lives, the question which is daily asked of us it to whom do we truly give our loyalty? Who reigns over our lives and governs the decisions we make each day? So in many respects these questions have not changed in all the centuries, and the texts we have before us are descriptions of the places and ways people of faith have found their answers. In the first two texts which were read, we have the testimonials recorded from people who were suffering, who faced persecutions. The texts were written to provide comfort and hope. The selection of these particular verses from the seventh chapter of Daniel reflect nearly two thousand years of interpretation that identifies Jesus in the vision of Daniel with the “one like a human being”. And since Jesus himself quotes this passage in both Mark and Matthew’s accounts when foretelling that his disciples will someday “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power” and “coming with the clouds of heaven” as well as in Matthew 24 when describing the coming of the Son of Man states “and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” So it is hard for Christian audiences to see this in anything other than a Christological and Trinitarian light. But for the original audience the spotlight was on the kingship and lordship of God, the LORD most high. Kingship and God’s sovereignty are the central focus of the Daniel passage—the sovereignty of the heavenly kingdom over the earthly kingdom—and heavenly kingship is not divorced from earthly kingship—no matter how it might look at any given instance of time. The context for the writing of Daniel was not the same as that literally pictured in the narrative which was the Babylonian exile but occurred much later during the persecution of Judean Jews by the Syrian King Antiochus IV who devastated Jerusalem in 127 BC and desecrated the temple. This vision arose to offer hope to Jews who had been subject to foreign rule for four centuries and now were victims of state terror and persecution. Even as they saw their houses burned, their loved ones tortured and slaughtered, and their temple profaned by an “abomination that desolates” as also recorded in Daniel, this vision of Daniel allows them to see something else: the end of empires, the sovereign power of God, and their own future kingdom and place within it. In place of their current situation this vision showed them that God would establish a new and everlasting kingdom that would not pass away. This kingdom would be given not only to the one like a human being, but also “to

the people of the holy ones of the Most High.” All these other kingdoms, and there were many, were characterized by violence, destruction, exploitation, and oppression. The final kingdom which God would bring and would be given into this one like a human being would be different, not only would it be everlasting...the final, eternal kingdom would be oriented toward justice. Its origin was at the very throne of God. In this week’s gospel passage, Jesus declares to Pilate: “my kingdom is not from this world” in verse 36. This statement discloses the origin but not the scope of the kingdom that belongs to our Lord. Pilate then says: “So you are a king...” but since punctuation was not included in the original text, we don’t know if this was meant to be a statement or a question. In any case Jesus, did not exactly give him a direct answer. What often happens is that when we read these words we make the mistake of imagining Christ’s kingship is an abstraction away from earthly politics. Many have interpreted this to mean that Jesus’ kingdom is somewhere in “heaven” and not relevant to this world. However, when placed next to the understanding of God’s sovereignty over all realms, it seems that Jesus is just saying that the rules, the values which govern his kingdom are different from those of the current system. In other words, Jesus does not seek or have to exercise the type of authority that seeks to be on top that achieves it by oppression, corruption of justice and the type of hypocrisy found in Pilate and the leaders of the Jewish temple. In truth, for those whose King and Lord is Christ in the here and now; for those who follow his teachings, the call is to bring that kingdom and its values into the here and now. Because in the here and now, many still suffer political domination, state terror, and persecution. In this world others exercise authority and participate willingly in political systems which deny the marginalized safety and well-being. God gave sovereignty to this Human One in both visions to lead a response to the evil perpetrated by those who caused suffering, to bring God’s kingdom near. In doing so, God sought to free and empower the oppressed and inaugurate just rule on earth as in heaven...just as Jesus taught us to seek through our prayers. The image presented in Daniel is needed again and again. It is needed because Daniel’s vision shows the eternal sovereignty of God as empires rise and fall; it presents the hope of a future for an embattled people. The opening of John’s letter to the seven early Christian churches comes in much the same context of people needing hope in the face of persecution; needing to know despite appearance God is still sovereign at and work among them. The recipients of this letter know all about kings and kingdoms—emperors and empires—and being persecuted. John describes the empire using metaphors of beasts blending idolatry with domination and economic exploitation which had dehumanized the people of his world. John then describes a different kind of king—a king who actually raises the status of his followers. A king who came to serve; not to be served. Revelation imagines an alternative to the powers that lay claim to us in proclaiming Christ as a king who very blood creates a new kingdom of priest. Revelation indeed gives us the image of a different type of king and Lord. Christ’s lordship judges all other would-be authorities. It also marks those who follow Christ as a holy people within a new community...citizens of a new kingdom within this world. As citizens of this kingdom, these followers are called to be like Christ. They are called to witness: to give “testimony”. The word in Greek is *martyr* because so many who testified early in the history of the church were persecuted and died for their witness. There are still places in this world where that may be the result. Although it is highly unlikely to be the result for any of us; a true witness to the values which Jesus taught are not often popular in our

culture today—in a polarized society the concept of accepting and offering love to those not sharing our opinions and views is not well received. Yet if Christ is our King and Lord are we now required to offer love to others—even our enemies...and does not sharing our view really make someone our enemy? In a highly divided world, we are called to declare our loyalty and if we really wish to claim Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, we need to recognize that he is truly a different kind of king...a king whose kingdom's values are not the values of the world in which we live, but are the values of the kingdom whose values we are called to live out. The end of the church year which occurs today is both the reminder of the end of mortal time and the beginning divine time. It is the end of our waiting to be a community of priests and also the beginning of Jesus' return. The one who is and who was and who is to come. This statement from Revelation is not a statement of finality, of fulfillment through singular kingly power, but is a statement that God lives in and among our worldly affairs. That God is present in ways that fill history, that make God present right now and in ways to come, that we cannot see or imagine. Time limitations without which we cannot comprehend existence do not exist for our God who is Alpha, Omega, past, present and future. And the opening of our Revelation passage also reminds us of two gifts from our King and Lord...grace and peace. With these gifts from the one who is and was and always will be...we are truly blessed. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.