

Each year many churches observe “Christ the King” Sunday. The continuing use of “king” may sound outdated in our day. Some seek to avoid the gender and political hurdles posed by “king” in the 21st century by renaming it “Reign of Christ” Sunday. I lean in that direction, but with a caveat. For when push comes to shove, as we have had the bad luck of experiencing of late, the church cannot escape the tension when secular authorities presume to claim the mantle, if not name, of king and king-like prerogatives. That tension is built into our faith moorings by our allegiance to *Christ*: whose literal meaning in Greek is “anointed one.” You know, *king*.

Jeremiah 23 provides an intriguing way to address this tension. You may have noticed that Jeremiah never mentions the word “king” in this text, at least in most translations. Except, the passage is all about kings. “Shepherds” served as a code word for kings, no doubt derived from the original vocation of Israel’s idyllic though far from perfect king: David.

But what is of particular importance to “shepherd” as metaphor for king, and its connection to any present-day “bigly kingly” wannabe, is the Hebrew word for shepherd. *Raah* means “one who feeds;” even as its related verb form means “to feed.” So instead of defining kings vis a vis their presumptions of power (*I can do anything I want in my land*), Jeremiah urges the understanding of “king” as one whose core vocation is responsibility for feeding those in the land. To tend to *their* needs. To insure *their* well-being. To act on *their* behalf. Jeremiah is explicit at the very outset about “woe to those” who forget that vocation. Those who, as Ezekiel 34 also implies, feed **off** the people instead of feeding them. It is not just the Bible but history itself that speaks woe, and records harsh ends, to that abuse of power and vocation.

So to all: a blessed No Kings but One Shepherd Who Reigns Sunday!

For Reflection and Action:

Call to mind the theme of “shepherding” in familiar hymns and other sacred music.

How do those pieces and lyrics relate to Jeremiah’s imagery of leaders of people as shepherds?

How might Jeremiah’s imagery of shepherds shape our practice of discipleship in these times?