

What Kind of King?

Luke 4:1, 5-8; Luke 23: 32-38

This Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent, is in the Christian calendar “Christ the King Sunday”. But what kind of king was Jesus, *is* Jesus? It is an urgently important question as many Christians today want to make Jesus king of America. Is this what Jesus had in mind? What kind of king? I think Jesus was transforming, even subverting the meaning of kingship itself.

To ask “what kind of king?” is to ask “what kind of power?”, not just for Jesus but also for us who follow Jesus.

There is a surge of Christian nationalism in America today that wants Christians—and a certain kind of Christian—to control all branches of government so that their values will be made the law of the land. Many politicians have joined up.

One of the streams of Christian nationalism is called Dominionism or Seven Mountain Dominionism. It says that there are seven mountains of society over which Christians should have dominion: religion, arts, courts, media, business, family and government. It follows the thoughts of 19th century Dutch politician and theologian, Abraham Kuyper who wrote:

There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not say, “Mine!”

This is not the kind of king Jesus had in mind to be. So let’s turn to the records of Jesus and to the gospels.

I

Jesus had just been baptized in the Jordan and anointed by the Spirit to be God’s son. But what kind of son was he to be? And what was his mission as the son of God in the world? So, the same Spirit who anointed him *drove* him into the wilderness to be tempted, tested by the devil as to what kind of son of God, what kind of king was he to be?

The second of three temptations was a doozy. The devil took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment in time. He said, “To you I will give all dominion, authority and glory... If you worship me, it will all be yours!” Jesus could have said, “Mine!” and taken up the crown, but Jesus refused the crown Satan offered him in the wilderness. Too many Christians today are scurrying around to pick it up and try it on.

The temptation would come and come again. John’s gospel records that when Jesus fed the multitude in the multiplication of the loaves, he realized the

crowd was about to take him by force and make him king. But Jesus withdrew to a mountain by himself. Not that kind of king!

II

In Mark's gospel, James and John, sons of Zebedee, aptly nicknamed, "sons of thunder", came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, would you give us whatever we ask? Would you, Jesus?" Jesus said, "What do you have in mind?" They said, "We want to sit at your right and left hands as your kingdom comes in its glory!" They wanted to be Jesus' chief lieutenants when the kingdom came in power. There are a lot of James and Johns out there.

Jesus then pulled all the disciples together and said,

You know about the rulers of the Gentiles, how they like to lord it over them...But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first must be slave of all.

Then he added:

For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many.

This kind of king: a servant king, a self-sacrificing king, a king who sometimes comes in hidden form to share our plight and be with us side by side.

III

When Jesus was arrested, Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus side-stepped the question and said,

My kingdom is not from this world. If so, my disciples would now be fighting, swords drawn.

Jesus’ kingdom is not from this world. It is *in* the world, as Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven.” But his kingdom is not *of* this world, with its violence and domination.

Jesus’ kingdom is transforming the world by the power of love. Jesus reigns in the weakness of love that refuses to coerce and dominate.

When Jesus was dying on a Roman cross, people around him mocked. Some jeered: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself” “If you are the son of God, come down from the cross” Some jeered: “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God”.

But Jesus chose to die by the sword rather than take it up. And his love, made eloquent in suffering, has been transforming the world ever since.

That kind of king! Do we want that kind of king? One who rules in the weakness and power of love, not in violence and domination? That reigns through love’s persuasion, not coercive power?

IV

The Christian church made a fateful choice in the 4th century. The emperor Constantine made the offer: I will make you the official religion of the Roman Empire if you will join forces with me. Constantine thought that a church spread throughout the Empire would be useful in the consolidation of his power. After centuries of persecution, it seemed like a pretty good deal at the time. Some have called what we became then “Constantinian Christianity”, a Christianity wed to the State.

It has been with us in various forms ever since. Anabaptists in 16th century Europe took a stand against the Church/State union of Constantinian Christianity and suffered persecution for it. So with the 17th century Baptists in England. But it was an important witness to the way of Jesus and the kind of king he was. It still is an important witness, as many today want a new version of Constantinian Christianity.

Some Christians are in a panic over the gaining secularism in our nation. Studies project that by 2070, Christians will no longer be in a majority in our nation. So to “save” America, they think they must take up the reins of power. What we need to focus on is to renew the *church* and face its abandonment of the way of Jesus.

Part of the problem is that the church has focused on the religion *about* Jesus rather than the religion *of* Jesus. The religion *about* Jesus centers on God sending Jesus to die for our sins that we might have eternal life and enter into heaven.

The religion *of* Jesus centers on his life and teaching, on the love of God and neighbor, the Sermon on the Mountain, the love of one's enemy. It focuses on the way Jesus treated people, the way he crossed boundaries of race, gender, nation and religion to bring God's love to all. The way he refused the crown offered him in the wilderness and refused it again as he refused to take up the sword when he was arrested.

When the church focuses so much on the religion *about* Jesus that the religion *of* Jesus is obscured, it leaves itself open to Christian nationalism and Christian supremacy. It prefers to rule rather than to serve.

Southern Baptists began to lose their soul when they became the majority faith of the South. They began to throw their weight around, and they liked the taste of political power. Now they are a major part of the movement toward theocracy.

What about our church, our kind of Baptist Christian congregation? Baptist Theologian James McClendon always spells the word "Baptist" with a small "b",

because it better represents our identity as a spiritual movement, a movement that repudiated Constantinian Christianity and a Church/State union. Even named “Dissenters”, we were not afraid to be a minority in order to stay true to our values. Small “b” baptists are more spiritual movement than institution.

Paraphrasing Jesus, Flannery O’Connor said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd.” Are we willing to be odd for Jesus’ sake? For the sake of the one who said, “love your enemy” and “turn the other cheek”, who said, “take care of the little ones, the hungry, thirsty, sick, naked and imprisoned.” Who said, “you’ve heard of the rulers of the Gentiles, how they lord it over the others, *but it must not be so among you.*”

What kind of king was Jesus, is Jesus? A servant-king, an exiled-king, a broken king, a king who rules in the weakness of love.

I said earlier that to ask “what kind of king?” is to ask, “what kind of power?”—for us as well as for Jesus. Jesus’ way of transforming the world is the way of the servant-leader, choosing to be salt and light in the world rather than trying to take it over. It is the way of humility, not certainty. In the phrase “dead certain”, the operative word is “dead”.

In a few moments, we will take communion and then sing the words of Micah: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” I’m not sure we can do those first two, without the third. This is the way of Jesus who refused the crown in the wilderness but rules in our hearts through love. Will this be our way?