

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

WHAT IS A KING?

John 18:33-37

What is a king? We all have ideas as to how a king might look. A king is a male and usually an adult and rather mature looking. He is dressed royal ermine-trimmed red robes, with a golden jewel encrusted crown, gold braids around his neck and a scepter in his hand. We envision him on a throne or being borne on a litter, and in either case surrounded by his courtiers. His home is a palace of huge dimensions and encircled by walls and perhaps a moat.

Our concept of a king is that of one who is inaccessible to common folks, but upon whom the people depend for protection and prosperity. Whether he is good or evil, wise or foolish, he exercises authority and power over his subjects.

The truth is that most of our understanding of kings comes from reading history and fairy tales. How many of us have ever lived under the reign of a national king?

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the English poet and diplomat, Matthew Prior, who had a lot of personal experience with kings, put these words about kings in the mouth of Solomon the son of King David:

What pause from woe, what hope of comfort
The name of wise or great, of judge or king?
What is a king? – a man condemn'd to bear
The public burden of the nation's care;
Now crown'd some angry faction to appease;
Now falls a victim to the people's ease:
From the first blooming of his ill-taught youth,
Nourish'd in flattery and estranged from truth:
At home surrounded by a servile crowd,
Prompt to abuse and in detraction loud:
Abroad bereft with men, and swords, and spears;
His very state acknowledging his fears:
Marching amidst a thousand guards, he shows
His secret terror of a thousand foes;
In war, however prudent, great, or brave,
To blind events, and fickle chance a slave:
Seeking to settle what for ever flies:
Sure of toil, uncertain of the prize.
(*Solomon*, bk iii, l. 275ff)

The picture is that of a man burdened with responsibility because of the power and authority that was his to exercise as king.

How does this description of a king fit Jesus? Here he is before Pilate looking every bit the prisoner on trial for his life and nothing like what we expect of our king. Pilate, having the authority of Rome, the power of the Roman legions to back him and the responsibility for Palestine appears to be the king in this scene.

Yet, as the examination of the prisoner unfolds, the question arises as to just who is in charge? The substance of Jesus' answers indicates that he is prosecuting the Governor. Pilate asks, "Are you king of the Jews?" Jesus retorts, "Who do *you* think I am?" From that point on, Pilate is on the defensive. The interrogation of Jesus turns into Jesus schooling Pilate on the true purpose of a king – the revelation of the truth; eternal reality.

Jesus deals with this Roman official in much the same manner he did with the Pharisee Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well. He cuts to the central question for all human beings, Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. "Who do you think I am?" The question is put in personal context for each individual. The Pharisee hears the truth in terms of the Exodus. For the Samaritan woman, Jesus speaks of Jacob's well. The Roman governor is introduced to the Truth through the concept of kingly power. Jesus is revealed in these three conversations as the Light, the Living Water and the Truth and as he tells Nicodemus, "whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (John 3:21).

Pilate was not comfortable or accustomed to being out of control. In fact his job description could have been summarized by the phrase "keeping control of the Jews." Yet, early on this morning he finds himself unable to exercise control over this unruly crowd of Jews. He is desperate to use his authority to overrule the crowd, but fears losing complete control over them and having a riot on his hands. In addition, he is faced with a defendant that is accused of proclaiming himself king and treats Pilate as if he were. When the governor plays the power card – when he asks Jesus if he really knows the degree of his power – Jesus trumps it by saying that Pilate's authority and power are not his at all, but really belong to God. What is more pathetic than the representative of the most powerful nation in the world standing stripped of his power before a beaten and bound prisoner?

Throughout history, kingdoms have been characterized by the nature of their kings. The kingdoms of the world are established and maintained by violence and power. The Kingdom of God is founded on obedience and love. The world sacrifices others to fulfill its will. God sacrificed himself to fulfill his. Self-sacrificial love is an alien concept in the world, but a fundamental characteristic of the Kingdom. In Jesus' death we received the ultimate revelation of God's love and the example of how we are to love one another in accord with God's will. That is the "truth" that escaped Pilate. In Jesus the King we see the true nature of the Kingdom of God. The cross was the throne of Truth and Jesus mounted that throne and took on the crown of the glory of God.

Even on the cross, or more accurately, supremely on the cross Jesus modeled the thirst that those who would be citizens of his kingdom must experience. This is the thirst for God that is satiated only through obedience to his will. How would our lives and our witness be different if we imitated Christ before the powers and principalities of this world? If our faith was strong enough to actually believe that no one in the created order could have power over us unless it was given to them by God we would be far less anxious to vindicate ourselves and to separate ourselves from the world and our neighbors. If we were to imitate Christ we would not be so prone to take matters into our own hands but willing to stand in testimony to God's sovereign power. After all, our King has shown us that the greatest defeat for worldly powers is to stand before them in defiance of their power without succumbing to the exercise of worldly power ourselves.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, you are the perfect image of a king according to the will of the Father. As citizens of your righteous kingdom empower us through the Holy Spirit to live our lives in imitation of your life – as true followers of you. Help us to develop the true security that only comes from knowing God as our loving and righteous Father, so that in obedience to his will we may be living testimonies to the Truth. Draw us closer in our walk with you and give us the courage to stand before the powers and principalities of this world and proclaim you as our king. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on November 22, 2009, Christ the King Sunday, Proper 29.