

Psalm 47

Revelation 1:1-8

November 25, 2018

Christ the King Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

PRESBYTERIANS AND THE KING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is **not** a sermon about Presbyterians and the King, Elvis.

This is **not** a sermon about Presbyterians the King of Pop, Michael Jackson.

This is **not** a sermon about Presbyterians and the King of the Blues, B.B. King.

This is **not** a sermon about Presbyterians and King Sirloin, although a bunch of us Presbyterian students used to eat at that restaurant in Mooresville, NC for their Friday night “All-You-Can-Eat Steak Buffet” (until they stopped that promotion after the Davidson football team cleaned them out one Friday night!).

This **is** a sermon about Presbyterians and the King, the King of kings or, as Revelation 1:5 calls him, “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” Jesus Christ.

This **is** a sermon about Presbyterians and the King on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday on the Christian Church calendar, one week before the beginning of Advent.

Here’s how the meaning and significance of Christ the King Sunday is described in an article on the Presbyterian Mission website:

“At the conclusion of the Christian year, the church gives thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ, who is Lord of all creation and is coming again in glory to reign. The festival of Christ the King (or Reign of Christ) ends our marking of Ordinary Time after the Day of Pentecost, and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope for Christ’s coming again at the end of time.

“The day centers on the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the whole universe. The celebration of the lordship of Christ thus looks back to Ascension, Easter, and Transfiguration, and points ahead to the appearing in glory of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Christ reigns supreme. Christ’s truth judges falsehood. As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil.

“Such concepts as these cluster around the affirmation that Christ is King or Christ reigns! As sovereign ruler, Christ calls us to a loyalty that transcends every earthly claim on the human heart. To Christ alone belongs the supreme allegiance in our lives. Christ calls us to stand with those who in every age confessed, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord!’ In every generation, demagogues emerge to claim an allegiance that belongs only to God. But Christ alone has the right to claim our highest loyalty. The blood of martyrs, past and present, witnesses to this truth.”¹

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, we change the pulpit cloths and stoles to white and we sing, “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus; his the scepter, his the throne; Alleluia! his the triumph, his the victory alone! Alleluia! King eternal, Lord omnipotent we own.” And we sing, “Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne . . . Awake, my soul, and sing, of him who died for thee, and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.” And on this Christ the King Sunday, we stand on the threshold of Advent, when we will hear the promise of the one who is coming, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

But, to be honest, there’s more than a little bit of irony in today’s sermon title, “Presbyterians and the King.” After all, we gather on this Christ the King Sunday as American Presbyterians who have a dominant anti-king gene in our DNA. Our very existence as a nation is founded upon these principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence:

“whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” After acknowledging that long-established governments should not be lightly overthrown, the Declaration nevertheless asserts, “But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.” Twenty-seven complaints against the King of Great Britain are then listed. At the end of the Declaration, after “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,” the signers declared “That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.”

It is said that King George III referred to the Revolutionary War as “that Presbyterian rebellion.” His officers and loyalists apparently thought the same, also.

Ambrose Serle, secretary to British General Howe in New York charged that without the support of Presbyterian ministers, the war could not be sustained. He thought Presbyterians fought to establish Presbyterianism as the official church of America.

A mercenary Hessian captain fighting with the British said to a friend in Germany, “Call this war, dearest friend, by whatsoever name you may, only call it not an American Revolution, it is nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian Rebellion.”

Isaac Atkinson, a British loyalist from Maryland, called the war “a religious dispute and a Presbyterian scheme.” Thomas Smith, a loyalist from Pennsylvania, said “that the whole was nothing but a scheme of a parcel of hot-headed Presbyterians.”²

So, what are we Presbyterians supposed to think about this King we praise and worship on this Christ the King Sunday? It all depends on what kind of king we have.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence rightfully rebelled against “a long train of abuses and usurpations” and “a history of repeated injuries and usurpations.”

But we worship and praise a different kind of King:

- * the faithful witness
- * the first-born of the dead
- * the ruler of the kings of the earth
- * the one who loves us
- * the one who freed us from our sins by his blood
- * the Alpha and the Omega
- * the one who is and the one who was and the one who is coming
- * the Almighty

Last Sunday we heard this good news from the opening chapter of Colossians: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14) This week we hear “he made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (Revelation 1:6)

That’s the kind of King we praise, worship, and serve — not a king with a long history of abuses and injuries against us, but a King who suffered a long history of abuses and injuries on our behalf — not a king whose object was to establish an absolute tyranny over us, but a King who gave up everything that was rightfully his so that we might have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, who broke the tyranny of sin and death over our lives.

In his book, *Whistling In the Dark*, Frederick Buechner muses about the “King”:

“You think of the newly anointed King David conquering unconquerable Jerusalem and crowning his triumph by bringing into it the ark of God as all the people made merry with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals. You think of the Pope himself proclaiming Charlemagne Emperor and *augustus* on Christmas Day and all Rome going mad with enthusiasm. You think of Shakespeare’s Henry the Fifth comforting his troops on the eve of Agincourt and of the *grands levers* of Louis the Fourteenth which rivaled in splendor the rising of the sun. Muffled drums and vast crowds of mourners followed the deaths of kings, and the peal of bells and dancing in the streets their births. The person of the king was so sacred that affronts upon him were punished with the most horrible of torments, and his touch had the power to heal.

“Passionate loyalty, adoration, terror, awe — no words are perhaps too strong to describe the feelings evoked in his subjects by the mere sight of him, and it’s no wonder. He held the power of life and death over them. Their destiny was in his keeping. He defended the kingdom against all enemies both from within and from without. He

was the kingdom. If he rejoiced, it rejoiced with him. If he was angry, the earth trembled and the crops might fail.

“‘Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!’ proclaims the Psalmist (24:10) This rich metaphor is used again and again in Scripture. Yahweh alone was King over Israel, the prophets thundered: to be feared, to be loved, above all else to be obeyed. When the people decided they wanted a king of flesh and blood like all the other nations, Samuel warned them that the consequences would be tragic (1 Samuel 8:4-18), and history proved him correct in every particular. In the long run Israel as king and kingdom vanished from history altogether.

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, it was as King and Son of David that his followers hailed him. If it was a king like David, the conquering hero that they were looking for, they were of course bitterly disappointed. What they got was a king like David the father, who, when he heard of his treacherous son’s death, went up to his chamber and wept. ‘Would I had died instead of thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!’ he cried out. They were the most kingly words he ever uttered and an uncanny foreshadowing of events some thousand years off.”³

Yes, indeed, it depends on what kind of King we Presbyterians worship and serve. Buechner writes of an earthly king, “He held the power of life and death over them. Their destiny was in his keeping.” The same is true of King Jesus. But we don’t have to worry and wonder about our King being fickle and oppressive and abusive and tyrannical.

On this Christ the King Sunday — and every day — we worship and serve the King who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.

To him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Long live the King!

Let us pray: Jesus, you are the King of Glory, you are the Lord of Lords, and King of Kings. Lord, we pray for your Kingdom to come here now, bringing a kingdom of justice, righteousness, hope, love, peace, mercy and grace for all. Lord, we ask that you rule in our hearts, lead in this world and govern over your kingdom. Lord, thank you for being a different kind of King. Thank you for your goodness and kindness in our lives. Thank you for your generosity. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for your Kingdom that is unlike any Kingdom in this world. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Christ Reigns Supreme,” An excerpt from the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Geneva Press, 2003, p. 151), found under “Christ the King/Reign of Christ” at www.presbyterianmission.org.

²All information is taken from Richard Gardiner, “The Presbyterian Rebellion?” (September 5, 2013) at www.allthingsliberty.com.

³Frederick Buechner, “KING,” in *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), pp. 69-71.