



“Christ is King – A Celebration of Thanksgiving”

*Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 23:1–4; Luke 1:32–33; John 10:14–18;
John 12:12–15*

As we approach Thanksgiving, let us remember to be thankful that Jesus Christ is our King. There are no rivals.

How much experience do any of us have with kings? We are Americans, and our founders wisely rejected the rule of a king long ago. More than three thousand years ago, the prophet Samuel urged his fellow Israelites to do the same – or, better said, to continue embracing God as their king (1 Samuel 8). Nevertheless, the Israelites thought they knew better; they wanted a king, just like all their neighbors. So, they got one, and it did not go well.

The kings of the ancient world were not like the kings and queens of today, who are essentially figureheads, stripped of any real power. In the ancient world and up to the time of the *Magna Carta*, kings, as well as occasional queens, were absolute monarchs. Some exercised their total sovereignty with the good of the people in mind. Most used the power to satisfy their personal desires. However, in nearly all cases, their rule was absolute. This is why assassination was such a popular way of dealing with an errant king, such as the Israelite King Amon of Judah (641-639 BC). He lasted only two years on the throne.

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Jeremiah 23, like Ezekiel 34, opens with God’s indictment of Israel’s shepherds, i.e., their leaders, specifically their kings.

The prophets of Israel promise that God will raise proper shepherds, culminating in “a righteous branch.” This shepherding king will be, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, “A ruler who knows how to rule justly. He will make sure of justice and keep people united. In his time Judah will be secure again and Israel will live in safety” (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

Although the imagery of a shepherd king was associated with David, he had been dead for centuries by the time Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote their works. The prophets pointed ahead to a day when God would raise a shepherd-king from the house of David, who would usher in God’s reign. In other words, a messiah. Kings were anointed. Thus, the king was the “anointed one,” or *mashiah* in Hebrew, which is brought into English as “messiah.” *Mashiah* was taken into Greek as *christos*, becoming “Christ” in English. Thus, every time we refer to Jesus as Christ, we are essentially calling him King Jesus. Therefore, the true Shepherd King, the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords, is, of course, Jesus. Moreover, there is even more to the Bible’s presentation of King Jesus.

God, the Good Shepherd

The imagery of God as the good shepherd and we as his flock is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Bible. It is not a very complicated or intellectual portrait. God cares – that is it. He cares for his flock and for each sheep in it. Even in a flock of a hundred sheep, the good shepherd will search high and low for the one who is lost (Matt 18:10-14). God finds for us the green pastures and the still waters.

The fact that we need a shepherd seems to be a lot harder for us to learn than it is for the sheep. We cherish our supposed independence, whereas the sheep are perfectly content being wholly dependent on the shepherd. In fact, sheep require the care and protection of a shepherd in a way that other herd animals do not, as sheep have lost the ability to defend themselves. They are an easy meal for the wolves.

We think we do not need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We cannot accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. No doctor can prevent our death. We cannot have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent

war. We imagine that the wolf is our problem to fix, when it is the shepherd's. God knows better than we do that a good shepherd is precisely what we need.

God is this good shepherd...and Jesus is the Shepherd King of Jeremiah 23...and God was always to be Israel's true king...and Jesus is not only human, but God himself...and on and on...until we come to grasp that in Jesus, God is returning to claim his throne.

Who is Jesus?

"Who is Jesus?" It was the question on a Sunday in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, and it is the question for our world still. The palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. In John's brief telling of Jesus' welcoming, the crowds shout "Hosanna," which means "save us" in Hebrew. They sing out, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel." This is from Psalm 118, a song of God's victory, the day when God has finally acted. However, the crowds wrongly expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King, that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has come to a head.

John helps us to see that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9, a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – a very messianic passage, in other words. However, John changes the opening words of the quotation from "*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*" to "*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*" Here, John draws on Zephaniah 3. I am continually struck by how carefully the Gospels and the other New Testament writings are constructed. John, like the other writers, skillfully pulls Scriptural quotations and allusions together to make his points. We might wonder whether any of his readers could comprehend John's careful use of the Old Testament, but that is only because our own knowledge of Scripture is so inadequate. We miss things that would be plainly evident to John's first readers. The fuller quote from Zephaniah 3:14-15 (I have underlined a key phrase) will make clearer what John is trying to accomplish with the change:

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is God himself. Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem to the people, visions that foretold its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries that followed, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there was no clear indication that God had returned. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land, they were indeed still in jail, with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven – and the coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God's Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel.

The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on Monday, Jesus did not head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and their temple. A couple of decades later, long before the writing of any of the Gospels, Paul would describe the body of Christ as God's temple, as well as each believer (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20).

When the Romans hung the sign reading "King of the Jews" on the cross above Jesus, they meant it as mockery, but it carried the truth that probably escaped even the Jews, for they expected a human king like their idealized King David. However, earlier in Israel's history, they did not have a human king. Their king was God!

The early Christians came to understand that their proclamations of Jesus as Messiah and God brought back together what had been separated. Jesus was King, Lord, and Savior. In the beginning, he was with God and

was God (John 1:1). And now, he was installed as the King of Kings, Lord of all that is, victor over the forces of sin and death (Rev. 19).

A life of thanksgiving

Even as we celebrate Christ the King, we celebrate a very American holiday, Thanksgiving. The holiday of Thanksgiving is a great time to rekindle the thankful hearts that ought to characterize us throughout the year. In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home*, Richard Foster writes, "Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth'" (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9:1) and with Paul who wrote "I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) and with the writer of Hebrews, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

As in all things, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into praising God and giving thanks joyfully to Him. Foster reminds us of Augustine's phrase, "God thirsts to be thirsted after," and writes, "Our God is not made of stone . . . Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude."

Let us not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude.

Nonetheless, as we return to the glories of Advent and Christmas, we can remind ourselves to be a grateful community, seeking ever to grow in our ability to see and experience God in all His goodness.