

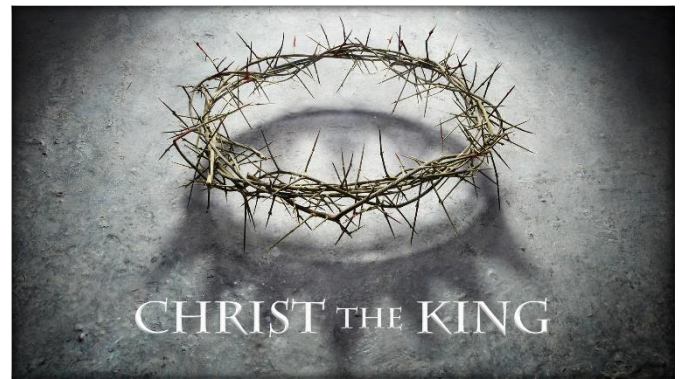
“Christ the King”

Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:1-4; Luke 1:32-33; John 10:14-18, 12:12-15

Jesus, the one true king!

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). But 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 largely figureheads, stripped of any real power. In the ancient world and up to the time of the Magna Carta, the kings, as well as the occasional queen, 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. But 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.



Christ the King Sunday

The Christian calendar begins with the first Sunday of Advent (next week) and ends with Christ the King Sunday, which is today. It is a special day that was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. The Second Vatican Council set it on the last Sunday of the church calendar in 1969. It is a day that is now on the church calendar of many Protestant denominations. The day is an opportunity to celebrate the kingship and kingdom of Christ before we begin Advent, which prepares us to celebrate the birth of Christ.

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 kings.

But the prophets of Israel promise that God will raise up 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’ll 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).

Though the imagery of a shepherd king was wrapped around David, he had been dead for centuries by the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The prophets pointed ahead to a day when God would raise up a shepherd king from the house of David who would usher

in God’s reign. In other words, a messiah.¹ Thus, the true Shepherd King, the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords, is, of course, Jesus. And 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’s 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 need the shepherd’s caring and protection in a way that other herd animals do not, for sheep have lost the ability to defend themselves. They are an easy meal for the wolves.

¹ 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.

We think we don't need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We can't accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can't 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 exactly what we need.

And 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?

This is the Palm Sunday question: "Who is Jesus?" It was the question for 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. But the crowds wrongly expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King, that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has come to a head.

But 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. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. But 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 3.² The fuller quote from Zephaniah 3:14-15 (I've 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 to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn't really any sign that God had returned.³ 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 didn't 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 individual 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 truth that probably escaped even the Jews, for they expected a human king like their idealized King David. But 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).

² John skillfully pulls together Scriptural quotations and allusions 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.

³ 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 certainly 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.