

Jesus, King!

Hespeler 20 November 2022 © Scott McAndless – Reign of Christ

Luke 1:68-79, [Jeremiah 23:1-6](#), Colossians 1:11-20 (video), [Luke 23:33-43](#)

The Prophet Jeremiah kind of famously never quite got along with most of the kings of Judah that he knew. He didn't like them because they were bad leaders who were making bad decisions that literally led the entire nation into an unmitigated disaster. It ended with the city of Jerusalem destroyed and the people led away into exile.

Jeremiah Criticizes the Kings

The kings didn't like Jeremiah either because he never hesitated to tell the truth about just how bad they were as leaders. Which is, of course, what Jeremiah is doing in the passage we read this morning. **“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.”**

The shepherds in question are pretty obviously the kings of Judah. He is simply saying how disappointed God has been with their leadership which has resulted in the destruction of the nation and the scattering of the people. The point is clear: bad leadership leads to bad outcomes for the nation.

A Golden Age?

And I'm not sure that we could find a timelier message for the age in which we are living. For we, like Jeremiah, appear to be living in a golden age of really bad leadership. I mean, Jeremiah might have dealt with some really bad leaders, but were they really as bad as the recent Prime Minister of the United Kingdom who managed to lead her country into exile in a mere matter of 44 days? That is some pretty bad shepherding.

And I do not want to drag Canadian partisan politics into a sermon where it doesn't really belong, so I'll just say that none of our provincial or federal leaders of any party are looking particularly spotless in the light of recent events and leave it at that. I think we can share Jeremiah's frustrations without getting into the specifics.

The Challenge of Christ the King

Today is Christ the King Sunday. And the thing about this day is that you really cannot deal with its themes without straying a little bit closer to political questions than we are normally comfortable with. For how can we talk about how Christ is our King without comparing him, in some sense, to the kind of leader that he's supposed to be better than in this world? To



refuse to do that is to strip the very notion of the kingship of Jesus of its radical power.

Jesus, as we know, was constantly talking about something that he called the kingdom of God (or sometimes the kingdom of heaven). And he chose that language very carefully. He was living and teaching within a kingdom that belonged to a man named Herod the Tetrarch. That kingdom was also part of a larger political entity called the Roman Empire.

Calling Worldly Leadership into Question

The central point of every parable he told and every saying he made about the kingdom of God was it was another way of doing things – a kingdom whose existence and nature called into question everything about the other kingdoms that people were living in.

The idea of the kingship of Jesus is there for the same reason. Everything about the leadership of Jesus is meant to criticise and put to shame the actions of this world's leaders. So let us take a look at some aspects of Christ's kingship today because I kind of feel as if our leaders could use a little bit of advice.

Who Identifies the Leader?

The lectionary gives us an odd passage to delve into that question today. Oh, the theme of Jesus' kingship does come up in it, but it does not come up in the way you might expect. How do we usually find out that someone is identified as a leader? We expect that person to get up and announce it to us, don't we? "Just follow me," they will say, "and I will lead you!" And then that identity is confirmed when that leader's supporters come to their rallies and their announcements and cheer. That is when we know that there is a leader among us.

The quintessential example of this, of course, is the former US president Donald Trump. Whenever he has been challenged as to whether he should be a leader, you know he's going to point to one thing above all, the number of people who turn out to his rallies. He is the kind of leader who understood this right from the very beginning.

I believe that it has been confirmed that, when he began his presidential campaign with that now legendary ride down the golden escalator, the adoring followers who greeted him on that day were paid to be there. He just knew that it didn't really matter why the people were there, he just had to show the world that video of adoring fans to convince the world that he was ready to lead.

Maybe this is something that Trump understood best, but, to a certain extent, it is something that all of our leaders are aware of. If there are no crowds, you just know that a certain person might be a politician, but they are not a leader.

Identified by Enemies

And that's what makes this story in the Gospel of Luke so surprising. For who, in this story, tells us that Jesus is a king? Not Jesus and not his supporters and fans either; they've all run away at this point. No, ironically, it is Pontius Pilate who tells us. He orders his troops as they impose his sentence of death upon our Lord, to make sure they have fixed the charge that he has been accused of above his head as he hangs in agony. **"This is the King of the Jews,"** the placard proclaims.

But, of course, Pilate does not mean it; Pilate is making the claim mockingly. He is making fun of the very idea that Jesus could be a king. And, of course, the people in the crowd take up the same mocking tone at the claim.

What then does this teach us about the kind of leadership that we need? I think it certainly invites us to look for something other than the enthusiasm of adoring fans for confirmation of leadership ability. A good leader is not always a popular leader because the decisions and directions that are needed are not always going to be the popular ones. Leadership always has to mean more than popularity.

Leaders who Serve themselves

But there are others who also take up Pilate's mocking tone. The people in the crowd watching begin to call out concerning Jesus, **"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"** And the soldiers who are carrying out the sentence, even though they are foreigners who barely understand the local language, know that the people are making fun of Jesus because of his claim to be a king and so they join in calling, **"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"**

This mockery makes it quite clear that everyone present understands something about the way that leadership works in this world. They are understanding that people seek leadership and power in order, above all, to save themselves – that is to say, to benefit themselves. Any leader who fails to obtain benefits for themselves from their leadership role is just a fool and deserves to be laughed at.

A Servant King

But, once again, Jesus models a very different kind of leadership for us. If Jesus is a king, he is not a king who is there in order to benefit or enrich himself. Jesus is the very model of a servant king and nowhere is that made clearer than when we see him willingly choosing a mode of service so radical that he takes him to the cross where he gives up his very life for our sake.

Do we have such servant leaders among us today? I think we can perhaps say that they are somewhat rare. But I do believe that they still exist. And as followers of Christ the King, I think it is important that whenever we see a leader in this world acting selflessly, giving of themselves in service of the people that they lead rather than getting what's coming to them, we need to pull out all the stops in celebrating them and honouring their contributions.

"Father, Forgive Them"

But if you thought of Jesus not seeking his own benefit from kingship was extraordinary, what about this? We are also told that, when Jesus was being most mistreated, this actually happened. **"Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"** And Jesus had every reason not to be forgiving at that point. He was being nailed to a cross! He had the power necessary to hold a grudge against the people who crucified him and punish them forever. But Jesus chose not to do that. Jesus showed us that leadership is not about holding grudges. How many leaders today model something so different from that? Many seem to see themselves as

having a privileged position precisely so that they can punish their enemies. Again, Jesus shows us a better way.

More than that, Jesus shows us that true power is found in forgiveness. Powerful people often think that they don't have to invest energy into understanding what the people who oppose them are thinking or feeling. But Jesus understood that his deep understanding of the people who were victimizing him, his understanding that they didn't even know what it was they were doing, showed a much deeper strength of character. And that is always what true leadership is about.

Brings Others Along

But Jesus' final display of leadership in this passage is perhaps the most powerful. As he hangs there in agony, one of the people who has been condemned alongside him is only too happy to join in on the mockery. But another one of the thieves shows a great deal of understanding. He recognizes that Jesus has been unjustly condemned. And so, he makes of him what seems to be a huge request, **"Jesus,"** he says, **"remember me when you come in your kingdom."** And to this Jesus replies, **"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."**

And I know that many readers have some theological problems with this part of the story. How is it that Jesus can grant to this man heaven without requiring anything of him? He does not require repentance of him; He does not ask any faith of him. He simply grants him what he asks. But this is, you see, the power of a true leader.

Such is the depth of Jesus' power, his love and his service, that he is able to bring people along with him by the force of who he is. If people are well led, they will get to the destination. Things like faith and commitment and repentance which leads to a change in life, these things will follow if people are well led. But when there is no leadership, there is no vision, and no one can follow.

The Challenge of this Day

To call this Christ the King Sunday is to issue a challenge to all believers and even to the whole world. I don't care who you are or what faith you may follow, if you aspire to be a leader – aspire to be a prime minister, a president or a good monarch – you will never stand up to the example given to us by Christ. The example of Christ calls into question whatever leadership I have been able to give in Christ's Church, but it also calls into question whatever leadership you have given in the church or in the world.

None of us will ever measure up, but the example of Christ the King is there to help us understand what real servant leadership is about, and how it actually can and does transform the world. May the Lord send us such leaders. But perhaps the prayer ought to be, may the Lord make you and me such leaders.