

The King of Kings
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 22, 2020
Trinity Bixby
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Galatians 4:1-7 (NLT)

Ephesians 1:15-23 (CEB)

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year, which is known both as Reign of Christ and Christ the King Sunday. But what is a king? And what does it mean when we call Christ our King?

For most Americans, a “king” is a distant concept, tied more to fairy tales and playing cards than to a lived reality. “They live in castles and rule their kingdom,” you might hear. Did kings rule alone? No – though they usually had the final word, ruling a kingdom is impossible for any one person to do alone. Kings relied on Dukes to oversee Counts, who counted on the Barons to bear taxes and tidings of the knights, squires, and gentlefolk, the liegelords who were responsible for the day-to-day activities of their lands. It was a hierarchy of land management, with much of the nobility responsible more for what we would call middle-management than in direct connection to the land. Making things more complicated, too, alongside the feudal hierarchy was the church, with its own hierarchy of Priest, Bishop, Archbishop, and Pope. Everyday life for the medieval nobility and clergy was a web of favors, alliances, and contracts.

Kings, then, made decisions that affected the whole kingdom, but they did not expect to do everything themselves. And, as all the medieval kings were human, they also tried to do everything they could to enhance their power – sometimes even at the expense of their own people. Seeing this practice, and having suffered through many abuses of power, the nobility and clergy of central Europe implemented an unusual system – they would have no king, and instead elect one of the “princes” of the realms to serve as their emperor until they died, and new emperor was elected. This was certainly not a democracy, however – only nobles and clergy could be electors, and there were only seven of them that could vote.

Remember that below all of the noble hierarchy were the most numerous groups of all – the peasantry and the artisans. These are the people that work the land and make the goods, anything that makes the rest of the medieval society possible. They also made up the main bodies of the medieval armies, as it happens, though usually had very little training. To the peasants, who their king was didn't really matter – but their local liegelord did. As the kings attempted to concentrate their power by signing more and more nobles into direct vassal contracts – rather than following the traditional hierarchy – liegelords also started increasing their demands on the peasantry, without offering anything additional in return.

Not surprisingly, the peasants were not happy with this behavior, and would organize into “peasants’ revolts” to try to change the conditions they were forced to labor under. After the advent of the printing press, and the wider distribution of the Bible into the local languages of the people, peasants and reformers alike took note of the implications of Paul’s letter to Galatia. Paul wrote, “God sent [the Son] to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that God could adopt us as God’s very own children... Now, you are no longer a slave, but God’s own child. And since you are God’s child, God has made you an heir.” To the peasants, this was clear language saying that all Christians were equal in God’s sight, and that the hierarchy imposed by the church and the kingdom was not intended. After all, in a different letter, Paul said, “God’s power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead, and sat him at God’s right side in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority and power... that might be named not only now but in the future.”

In short, Christ’s authority is greater even than the Kings and Emperors of our earth – the King of Kings - but unlike the Kings and Emperors, Christ cares for the lowly peasants, even going so far to as have been born in a manger, intimately familiar with the daily life of the ordinary people. The King of Kings was born a peasant!

These peasants (and others who felt as they did) reclaimed the power of the ancient creed – “Christ is my Lord. I have no King but Christ.” For the first disciples of Christ, this call was issued in dispute of the lordship of Caesar, emperor

of Rome. For these peasants, it rejected the lordship of the nobility of the Holy Roman Empire. And while the Peasant Revolt of 1525 failed utterly – others took note, and held the creed close at hand. A hundred years later, the same cry came up from the Scottish Covenanters, who held that King Charles II did not have authority over them. As Presbyterianism became outlawed in England, and oppressed in Scotland, many of these preachers and parishioners fled to the New World, where they might establish a society based on their principles.

On Christ the King Sunday, we, too, proclaim that we have no king but Christ. But it is about more than words – we need to take action, too. If we proclaim no King but Christ, we must act like Christ. Christians have, all too often done a lot of harm in the name of God, rather than the good that we want to be known for. The church, after all, is meant to be a piece of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth – the Body of Christ. In the Kingdom of Heaven – in the Body of Christ – we are supposed to love each other, to use the gifts that God has given us to lift up each other. We remember that we need each other – all of us, together. Because, together, we are God's children – and heirs to God's kingdom without end.

And so, may you proclaim Christ as King – and lead as Christ led, follow as Christ followed, and love as Christ loved. Amen.