

## Monarchy Redefined—Good Friday

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[Psalm 22](#)

[Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#)

[John 18:1-19:42](#)

*Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT*

I never noticed just how much mention of kings and emperors and thrones there is in our lessons this evening. It is God, in our Psalm, who is “*enthroned* on the praises of Israel.” The author of Hebrews explains who and what Jesus is—saying because of Christ we now can “approach the *throne* of grace with boldness...” And in our Passion reading, of course, we have *much* talk of kings. Is Jesus a king? Who is the king of the Judeans, and so forth? There is so much about kings and emperors, in fact, in *all* of Scripture.

But I wonder if the idea of a king, the image of a monarch, has lost its meaning. We are people of a democratic spirit. We, in theory, elect representatives and governors and presidents to make decisions and policies for us, not the other way around. A king on a throne? We cast out our king almost 300 years ago. What even is a monarchy?

Well, here we go, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

*Monarchy, a political system based upon the undivided sovereignty or rule of a single person. Supreme authority is vested in the monarch, an individual ruler who functions as the head of state and who achieves their position through heredity... Successful monarchs were believed to have a sacred right to rule: some were regarded as gods (as in the case of the Egyptian pharaohs or the Japanese monarchs), some were crowned by priests, others were designated by prophets (like King David of Israel)...*

Again, this is so far outside the realm of something we as Americans are used to. We are individuals who elect individuals who represent us and our values, be they religious or not. (Whether or not corporate power and the disenfranchisement of the poor has broken our democracy, is yet to be seen.) But, certainly, God does not determine who has absolute sovereignty here.

I guess the closest thing we have to “royalty” are ultra-rich celebrities. And as the Encyclopedia entry goes on, the idea of celebrities does actually make a little more sense. It says:

*Monarchy also results from the wish of a society...to groom a local leader who will properly represent its historical achievements and advance its interests. Monarchy, therefore, rests on the cultural identity and symbolism of the society it represents, and in so doing it [embodies] that identity within the society while also projecting it to outsiders.*

Who would be the American monarch by this definition? I don't know, I'm scared to ask. But I do find that paragraph very interesting, especially when we think of the exchange between Pilate and Jesus and the Judean leaders.

It's funny, what could be more political than this Passion story? Jesus is arrested by temple police, and brought to the authorities for an inquest. But because these Judean authorities are under Roman rule, their sovereignty, their power to punish him, is hemmed in. Jesus is called king, the people deny he's their king, saying only the Roman Emperor is their ruler. The people cry for crucifixion but do not have the power. Pilate does and does crucify. And Jesus' crime, written above him on the cross, is: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Judeans. (Which, if you ever wondered, is where the letters "INRI" comes from.)

The Gospel writer John is toying with what would have been for his readers the very familiar notion of king, of monarch. There is the clear-cut monarch—who has supreme authority over a territory, whether that's a tiny little kingdom like Judea, or a vast Empire like the Romans. There is another sense of monarchy going on here as well, however. A cosmic sense.

Jesus says: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. Pilate says, "So you are a king?" Jesus replies, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

John's Gospel is twisting everything, it's tipping things until they topple over. A monarch according to our Encyclopedia Britannica article—is supposed to be a leader who rises to power first on the grounds of their abilities and charisma, and then embodies the values and culture of their people. In fact, the Latin term that eventually would become "emperor" in Rome was a word that originally was used for a general after a successful campaign—imperator.

Kings are winners. Kings are popular. That's what a king in this world looks like. But look at John's Gospel: Jesus is losing in the eyes of the world. Jesus is very unpopular. All the signs and wonders Jesus did, all the eloquent teaching seems to come to nothing. The soldiers weave a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dress him in a purple robe. They come up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Judeans!" and strike him on the face. "Here is your King," says Pilate, knowing nothing of the truth of his mockery.

But in all this irony is, of course, the genius of John's Gospel. Such irony! Though Jesus appears to lose, his loss is true victory and transformation. Though Jesus appears to be rejected, he is gathering all people to himself. The Judeans have their territory. The Romans have theirs, much larger. But the territory of Jesus, the reign of God, is endless. Expanding infinitely in all directions, through all time and space, we believe. And most importantly inside us all.

The Psalmist tonight says it like this: "For dominion belongs to the LORD, who rules over the nations. Indeed, all who sleep in the earth shall bow down in worship; all who go down to the dust, though they be dead, shall kneel before the LORD." Everyone, of all times, everywhere belongs to Jesus.

Britannica rightly teaches us:

*A society will groom a local leader who will properly represent its historical achievements and advance its interests. Upon this leader rests the cultural identity and symbolism of the society they represent, and in so doing they make flesh that identity within the society while also projecting it to outsiders.*

Just so, on Jesus rests all the identity of God. In Christ the character and symbolism of God's infinite sovereignty is made flesh. And so, we confess and glory tonight, that the identity, the character, the image of this "king" is Jesus merciful, Jesus mocked, Jesus on a cross. The cross is not an accident, not a mistake—it's not even a tragedy. It is the throne of grace—the source of eternal salvation. At the center of the universe, at the heart of it all, is the cross.

*Amen.*