

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRIST THE KING

2 Samuel 5: 1-3

Psalm 122

Colossians 1: 12-20

Luke 23: 35-43

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The notion of kings and queens and royal households provokes mixed feelings in us Americans. When a royal event takes place in another country, Queen Elizabeth’s anniversary or a royal wedding in Japan, we sit by our televisions and watch with fascination and admiration for the pageantry. Yet, we know those royal households don’t have the complete rule they once had. We are also reminded that our nation started by a rebellion against a king who did have complete power and whose mandates we just couldn’t stomach. While we may admire the beauty and pomp, we want nothing to do with anything connected to royal power over our lives, or with the passing on of sovereignty from one royal family generation to the next. A note of humility is necessary though, as we ask ourselves if we have fared much better in our own democratic system, we who suffer through six months of endless campaign bytes and polls and contentious election results. But that’s another issue, let’s move on!

Today’s the last Sunday of the liturgical year. For the past three weeks we have been reflecting on the end time; last week in a very dramatic way with earthquakes, famines, plagues and persecutions. Today Jesus’ death on the cross is an illuminating light for those who call him “king” and acknowledge his sovereignty over them. In comparison to worldly rule and power, Jesus manifests an entirely different kind of rule. From a worldly perspective, Jesus’ “kingship” makes a mockery of what we normally perceive as royal power and privilege. You can’t blame those who don’t believe in Christ for chuckling at the title of today’s feast, especially if they were to hear the readings we have selected for our celebration. They don’t have the usual pageantry connected with the world’s royal events.

While each of the gospels presents a different picture of Jesus’ life—sometimes even in conflicting details—nevertheless, each includes the passion narrative; each presents Jesus’ death on the cross and each narrative is colored by the particular evangelist who wrote it. The writers understood that Jesus’ death was key to the revelation of his identity. So, if Christ is our king today, the one whose power and authority over our lives we accept, and then he royals from the cross.

For the Jews, God alone was their “king,” to only God would they acknowledge sovereign power over their lives. When the Israelites did anoint a king, they did so only because their ruler was supposed to mirror and represent God, and the king was responsible to God for the

people he ruled. Thus, when the people anointed David their king, they did so because he showed qualities of God's rule over them: David was Israel's shepherd-king, as God was their shepherd God. "You shall shepherd my people Israel and shall be commander of Israel.

The shepherd image from 2 Samuel sets the tone for our feast. David, the shepherd, was to tend God's flock and unite the scattered tribes of the chosen people. David made Jerusalem the capital of the united nation. He had plenty of human faults, but it is his shepherd rule that the Hebrew texts celebrate. We remember him on this feast because he is a type for Christ, our shepherd king. But while David's throne was in Jerusalem, Jesus' was outside the walls of the city, for that is where he was crucified...and his rule is for outsiders.

The second criminal was an outsider who saw in the battered and dying Jesus, God's reign. There was nothing spectacular or regal in Jesus at that moment. He appeared to be just another criminal dying at the hands of the ruthless state. But this "good thief" saw Jesus' kingship and submitted to it by his request, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And the shepherd-king, whom the gospels describe as searching for lost sheep, ushered into God's realm the first outsider who had faith in him.

What kind of king is this and what kind of sovereignty over us does he have? The exchange with the second criminal shows that Jesus perfectly mirrors Israel's God, for he dispenses God's mercy and forgiveness to outcasts. Right up to the very moment of death, Jesus shows that those who turn to him seeking forgiveness and salvation will find it. Jesus is taunted by the rulers, soldiers and the unrepentant criminal and told, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." The mockers want him to "save" himself; Jesus, the savior from the cross does save-- the crucified one next to him and other outsiders who turn to him.

Jesus' death defines his kingship, his rule. His power is present even in weakness and defeat for those who look on him with the eyes of faith. As throughout the gospels, even at his death, Jesus is found amid sinners, some of whom reject him while others accept the forgiveness and reconciliation with God he offers. There are no neutral people at his crucifixion, either they are mocking him or, they turn to Jesus in faith.

Those who mock him all use the word "save"—and of course they are referring to its immediate implications. Rulers, soldiers and one of the criminals ridicule and taunt Jesus to "save" himself, that is, free himself from the cross. But in the gospels, salvation means more than that. It includes every aspect of life and even the hope of victory over death. The gospel reader sees the deeper significance of Jesus' death; if he is to save us and our world, he must go through with his crucifixion. Hence, Jesus' rule is manifested in very un-regal way, without pomp and

circumstance, in a humiliating death. The irony to the soldiers' taunt is that Jesus really is the King of the Jews.

To all appearances Jesus, the king, has gone down in defeat. But the second criminal is able to see the deeper meaning of what is happening, despite Jesus' dying next to him on the cross, Jesus has power even over death and can freely give it to one who asks.

When have we been surrounded by overwhelming forces that felt like they had the upper hand in our lives? Haven't we felt impotent as we face habitually self-destructive behavior? Discouraged by repeated failures at attempts to change the direction of our lives? Bewildered as we tried to address unjust structures and power in civic or church life? Overcome with grief at the grave side of a loved one? Desperate and alone when we hear a poor prognosis for a serious health issue? Don't these moments seem to be a variation on the theme of today's gospel, when powerful forces sound their negative notes in our ears? Amid the disheartening "facts" and the lack of encouragement, how can we see in the resulting fog? The second criminal turned his head away from his mocking companion to Jesus. In the midst of his pain and the taunts around him he "kept his eyes fixed on Jesus," as we say here in the South, and saw hope in a hopeless place.

He and we are heartened by Jesus' response; there is more going on here than first meets the eye. God is here in the least likely and most impossible place! Who could imagine it? The King of the outcasts is dying on the cross, showing us what he told us all throughout this gospel: God is our shepherd and Jesus is the one whose rule takes us home. To him alone we bend our knee at this Eucharist.

JUSTICE NOTES

Taking justice as one's starting point in preaching forces us to re-imagine the preaching task. That's because the ship is intentionally being turned around in the homiletic process. Rather than preaching being seen as a linear-sequential, text-to-sermon process, the just-preaching paradigm sees the text and sermon in a dynamic interaction, with the active ingredients between the two being a concrete instance of injustice and the concrete need for justice in a present-tense situation. This is why preaching on justice cannot responsibly be done by merely teaching a Bible study on the prophet Amos. Amos may, and probably will, be brought in as a conversation partner as the preacher clarifies her or his own social and political analysis, critique and prophetic call, but just preaching's starting point is not necessarily Amos.

Just preaching's starting point is a *problem in the present*. Just preaching asks, "What is

wrong?” and “What should be done about it?” Amos and the larger backdrop of one’s understanding of the Bible, one’s theological orientation, and one’s ecclesial and social conditioning all function to help the preacher discern the problem that should be addressed in the present....

Just preaching asks, How should preaching’s message and agenda be shaped by:

- Injustice in our time?
- The ways justice is and isn’t in process today?
- Scripture’s perspective on justice?

-----Andre Resner, Jr., ed. JUST PREACHING: PROPHETIC VOICES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), ISBN 0-8272-1715-3, page 15.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder
[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to...

- Gary A. Trull #0412440 (On death row since 11/19/96)
- Lawrence E. Peterson #0320825 (12/12/96)
- Henry L. Wallace #0422350 (1/29/97)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. CD Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C.” The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and PDF) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer.

To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year C–CD” button on the left and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please go to our webpage to make a secure online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thank you and “Blessings on your preaching”,
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