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“Jesus the Servant King”

By Rev. Edgar F. Solís

Introduction:

My message today is a sermon full of contrasts.

King Charles III was officially proclaimed King on the Saturday following Queen Elizabeth's death. For the past 900 years in England, the coronation has been held in Westminster Abbey - William the Conqueror was the first monarch to be crowned there, and Charles will be the 40th.

King Charles III has become head of the Commonwealth, an association of 56 independent countries and 2.5 billion people. For 14 of these countries, as well as the UK, the King is head of state.

These countries, known as the Commonwealth realms, are: Australia, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, St Christopher and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, New Zealand, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu.

One cannot imagine how powerful a king in the past could be. A popular understanding tells us that, after all, a king is someone who wields much power, who can even be a tyrant and lord his authority over his subjects.

Think about the kings you've heard of.

For instance, Henry VIII of England divorced and executed wives who didn't bear him a living son.

He executed clergy and other rulers that didn't do what he wanted.

He possessed great power and wealth and used it for his personal agenda at the expense of people's lives.

Do any examples of kings who serve or who were willing to die for their people come to mind easily?

Although this kind of leader may have existed in history, we do not readily associate “service” or “being willing to die” with the role of a king.

This week is Christ the King (or Reign of Christ) Sunday.

SALT Bible Commentary states that *“This is one of the rare times in the year when Christianity’s two major feasts — Easter and Christmas, Cross and Incarnation — come into close connection. The one condemned before crowds in Jerusalem is the same one born in a forgotten, backwater town. The one hailed by angels, shepherds, and philosophers from afar is the same one eventually betrayed, abandoned, and left to die in shame. This contrast, this creative tension, is precisely the point. To paraphrase the great womanist theologian Delores Williams, the “kingship” of Christ can only be understood through this dissonance and harmony: “King of Kings!” on the one hand, as if sung by a resplendent choir; and “poor little Mary’s boy” on the other, as if whispered by an elderly woman standing alone. Or again, “Reign of Christ” on the one hand, and God’s child, exquisitely vulnerable, on the other.”*

Let us learn how Jesus defies our expectations and redefines the cultural understanding of what and who a king is.

Context Matters:

Christian author and teacher Mathew Myer gives us these crucial elements to understand the Bible context. He says that *“The central idea in the gospel of Luke, (echoed in this week’s reading) is that Jesus’ mission is to declare the dawn of the Great Jubilee: a new era rooted in ancient Israelite history and lore, of “release to the captives” and “liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” Likewise, for Luke, the heart of Jesus’ ministry is mercy — and while he*

does come to declare the nearness of God's kingdom and the inauguration of God's reign, the "kingdom" he has in mind is one of servanthood ("But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:26-27)), the "reign" he has in mind is one of mercy ("Be merciful, just as God is merciful" (Luke 6:36)), and the key action he has in mind, the essence of loving your neighbor, is to "show mercy" (Luke 10:36-37).

In first-century Palestine, crucifixion was a common Roman method of execution meant to humiliate the condemned, intimidate the populace, and thereby project imperial power. For a Jew in Jerusalem, a more terrifying, disgraceful death could scarcely be imagined, "hung on a tree...under God's curse" (Deut 21:23). Forsaken by his friends, Jesus is now mocked by his enemies: first the "leaders" from afar, then the "soldiers" on the scene, and finally a common criminal, himself disgraced and condemned on a cross next to his. A sarcastic sign hangs over Jesus — "This is the King of the Jews" — effectively announcing: Behold what happens to such "kings"! In a single sketch, here is the imperial kingship of Caesar, the rule of domination, cruelty, terror, and contempt. But what kind of "kingship" is this? In keeping with this Gospel irony, Christ's "kingship" is a perfect reversal of Caesar's: instead of domination, servanthood; instead of mockery, kindness; instead of cruelty, mercy.

Theological Reflection:

What I see in the passage of Luke is a powerful reversal of action and principles, an astonishing contrast of what it means to be a king.

Sometimes popular culture can help us to understand great and deep principles in life.

I love superhero movies, so I went to a movie theater to watch "Wakanda Forever,"

One of the phrases stuck in my mind – words spoken by the anti-hero of this movie, Namor: "Only the most broken people can be great leaders."

Without revealing the plot of the movie, I can tell you that the meaning and implication of this phrase resonates strongly with Jesus' character and mission.

Conclusion:

Dear church, Jesus is a different kind of "king" – one who refuses to use his power to fend off his opponents, much less take vengeance on them.

Instead, He does the opposite, calling on God to forgive them.

Far from the model of a contemptuous tyrant, Jesus' "kingdom" is a reign of servanthood and neighborhood, a community of love and mercy, open to all.

No, not only the "good" thief received the promises of paradise.

Remember, Jesus asked God to "forgive them" — meaning all of his opponents.

The story's point is clear: when it comes to salvation, God's mercy falls on the just and unjust alike.

God is calling us to belong and participate in a "kingdom" not of domination but of servanthood; not of mockery, but kindness; not of cruelty, but mercy.

Scottish author and theologian William Barclay said: "More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world. And more people have been driven from the church by the hardness and ugliness of so-called Christians than by all the doubts in the world."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "Not everybody can be famous, but everybody can be great because greatness is determined by service."

Let's imitate the actions and words of Jesus Christ as a servant King!

Amen!

