

Who's the King?  
Eph. 1:15-23  
Nov. 20, 2011  
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I want to share this quote with you from a noted presidential candidate. I'm actually kind of surprised he got away with this without a lot of controversy. He said, "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own."

Which presidential candidate made these provocative statements? That's from Abraham Lincoln in 1863, written as part of his presidential proclamation for Thanksgiving Day. And ever since that time, our country has celebrated Thanksgiving as a way of remembering the source of our choicest bounties of heaven and giving thanks that we are guided by a wisdom and virtue superior to our own, even if we don't always follow it.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday, the last day in the Christian year before the calendar rolls over and we start anew with the first Sunday of Advent next week, as we begin our anticipation of Christ's arrival. Today is the church's new year's eve, and we

pause to give thanks for all that has happened in this past year as we look forward to what God is going to do through us in the coming year.

This Sunday is not only Thanksgiving Sunday; it also plays another important role in the life of the church. It's one we don't talk about much. As we are about to begin a new church year with Jesus as a baby, we celebrate today the culmination of all that Jesus is, was and ever shall be. Today is what is known as Christ the King Sunday. We don't hear much about that these days, do we? I bet no one sent out their Christ the King greetings cards or put up their festive Christ the King lights. And yet this day serves as an important reminder of the supremacy and majesty of Christ, so that we don't forget the helpless infant signifies something infinitely greater.

In more recent times, this day has been called Reign of Christ Sunday instead of Christ the King as a way of combating male-dominated language used to describe Jesus. But another reason for that change in title has nothing to do with gender, but with government. Is it appropriate for Christians committed to democratic forms of government to refer to God as a reigning monarch? In other words, does the title "Christ the King" mean anything to us in 2011?

Think about how our culture represents the symbol of "king." We have the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. We have Elvis, the King. We have Burger King. None of those inspire a sense of majesty and reverence, unless you really like Whoppers. One of the reasons we have let go of Christ the King Sunday is that the title holds on

meaning for us. We think of kings as either powerless figureheads or power-hungry tyrants, neither of which describes our understanding of Jesus. Christ the good shepherd? We can relate to that. Christ the Prince of peace? We need that. But Christ the King? We simply have no use for that. It has no salient reference point in our modern world.

So do we throw it out? We'd be foolish to do so, based on how much scripture references Christ in royal terms. In various places Jesus is called King Eternal, King of Israel, King of the Jews, King of kings, King of the Ages, and Ruler of the Kings of the Earth. So we can't just dismiss this title because it's irrelevant to us. Instead, we need to discover why it was once relevant and then see how that might speak to us today.

Down through the centuries, kings and queens have had much different roles than they do today. Their power and authority was sweeping in scope, sometimes even unlimited. But monarchs were ascribed more than just human authority; they were often thought to be direct descendants of God. Roman emperors, who fall into the category of kingly rulers, were thought to be divine and were thus given the appropriate status and power over their realms. The king was the final authority on anything and everything; nothing trumped the king and no one dare go against them.

We might associate kings with the European monarchs we learned about in world history class, but the origins of Christ as King go back a lot further than that. Jesus was being called King when the Roman emperor was the

supreme authority and you didn't mess with the emperor. On the whole, their reigns were even more tyrannical than those of medieval kings and queens, and the frequent crucifixions and Coliseum bloodbaths were reminders of who was in charge. For Romans, there was only one king.

Of course, God's people, the Jews also had kings, going back through folks like King Solomon and King David to the first king, King Saul. But this idea of the Israelites having a king actually went against God's wishes. The Israelites wanted a king so they could be like all the other nations, but God said, "What? Am I not good enough?" But the people persisted, so God gave them a king while warning them it wouldn't go well, because when you give a person that much power, they'll find 101 ways to mess things up.

And for the most part, that's exactly what happened. By the time we get to Jesus, the idea of a true king of Israel was only a hoped-for fantasy. Sure, there was King Herod, but he was a Roman patsy who answered only to them. Remember, during this time, there is only one king, and that is the emperor.

So into that oppressive situation comes Jesus, who is eventually mocked and beaten and given a crown of thorns and slapped with the condescending label of "King of the Jews." No one realized the truth of that statement until a few days after the crucifixion, when the tomb was found to be empty. And from that moment forward Christians dared to go against Caesar and pledge their allegiance to a different king, one who rules in their hearts, not in their precinct or district.

To do so was a life-threatening act of faith for early Christians. Failure to renounce their faith in Christ and believe that he was the true King led to all kinds of torture and death. It wasn't safe to call Jesus your king. You were inviting persecution and martyrdom. But Christians did it and continued to do it, trumpeting their counter-cultural call of Jesus as King over all earthly kings and Lord above all earthly lords.

But what about today? If you dare to call Jesus King of Kings and Lord of Lords, about the only thing that will get you is a place in the choir during Handel's "Messiah." There's no risk in calling Christ our King, and there's very little meaning in it, as well. That's one of the challenges of being a Christian in a democracy; there just aren't a lot of good governmental titles we can co-opt

and use for Jesus. Jesus our president? Jesus our mayor? I don't find a lot of meaning in proclaiming Jesus my personal Speaker of the House. If possible, those are even more meaningless to us than Jesus our king.

So we can no longer look to government for our Jesus metaphors. But the danger of not finding a culturally-relevant metaphor for Jesus is that he then becomes for us either some shapeless spiritual ambiguity or a personal salvation attendant. Both of those might speak to our individual relationship with Christ, but not to the Christ who, as Paul says, "is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age and the age to come." That's Christ the King, who speaks not only to our hearts but to our world, who has

something more to offer than the powers and principalities that rule over us. If we can't proclaim Christ as the king in our world, we won't find much traction with Christ as the Lord of our lives, because we have to live our lives in the world. We can't just proclaim Christ in here; we also have to do it out there.

One promising metaphor I heard recently from author Christine Chakoian is Christ as our Chief Executive Officer. At first the idea of Jesus as CEO might sound a bit crass, but it takes on a different meaning when you realize that the word "corporation" comes from the same Latin root as "corpus," as in Corpus Christi, the body of Christ.

What would it mean for Jesus to be our CEO? It means that we must constantly evaluate whether the mission of the corporation, the

body, is being accomplished through us. What is that mission? I'd start with "Love God and love your neighbor." That's a pretty easy one to remember. Are we fulfilling the mission? Are we following the Boss' lead? Are we having a positive impact on the bottom line, not revenue but changed lives?

Ok, so this metaphor isn't perfect and we can name all kinds of ways that human CEOs aren't like Jesus, just like human kings aren't like the King of Kings. But Chakoian says if we're willing to run with the CEO metaphor, we might find a more culturally relevant way to talk about Jesus on this Christ the King Sunday. For example, it might humble us to be reminded that Christ cared so much that he left the comfort of the corner office to come down and hang around his staff. We might be

encouraged that Christ knows our frustration with working alongside those who don't carry their weight or are consistently annoying. We might be strengthened to remember Jesus the CEO rolled up his sleeves in the muck of the factory and field, the hospital and kitchen, the halls of power and the temple of worship. We might find reassurance in the fact that our Boss has compassion for those of us who, out of exhaustion or discouragement, are tempted to cut corners or even walk away from the job.

Ultimately, any metaphor we use for Christ will fall short. You can't describe what is indescribable. But we can take what we know, however imperfect it is, and fashion a way of understanding that speaks to us and our world. Whether Christ is the King or the CEO or Good Shepherd or the Prince of Peace, we are reminded on this day to be thankful that Christ is our Savior, a title that transcends all times and places and cultures. May he rule in our hearts and in our world.