

Christ the King Sunday
(The 34th Sunday in Ordinary Time)

II Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-18; John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4-8

This Sunday is **Christ the King Sunday** -- the final Sunday of this Christian Year. To conclude each Christian Year within the Protestant and Anglican traditions, the lectionary embraces the authority and rulership of Christ, not simply over the individual lives of those who embrace him as savior, but his authority, power, dominion and influence over the entire world. It is that Sunday of the Year that we are reminded that life is not about us! It is about Christ and His Kingdom!

II Samuel 23:1-7 reminds King David of the same as he nears the end of his reign and his own approaching death! It is David's final thoughts on what he has learned from life. And the lesson he has learned is that we are not called to serve our own interests, even as a king. We are called to serve God in the very way we choose to serve humanity.

II Samuel 23:1-7 is the second of two contiguous psalms or hymns, the first being II Samuel 22:2-51. That hymn celebrates God's faithfulness to David. But II Samuel 23 deals with David's faithfulness toward Israel. The former psalm deals with what God has done *for* David. But the second hymn reminds the reader that God has been faithful to David so that David can be faithful toward Israel. That second psalm deals with what God has done for the nation *through* David.

"The spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land" (23:2-4).

God is not interested in kings who have great armies, have accumulated great wealth, or live in splendor and displays of power, this passage in essence says. God wants kings who rule over their people justly, who know God intimately enough that they can speak God's word to the people, who live and whom the people know lives in the fear and awe of God. That has been the kind of king David has sought to be. By no means has he been perfect, but David shares that his heart's desire has been to rule faithfully as God's regent.

That is the kind of king God has called all monarchs of Israel – past, present or still to come – to also be. These are the essential characteristics and benefits of the ideal theocratic king. All monarchs are called to this impossible task. All will, to some degree, fail at it (as has David). But all are to be, in their finiteness and in their vulnerability, an example of what that ultimate Son of David, the Chosen One, the Messiah is to be. Because of this One's commitment to justice, mercy and equitable sharing of wealth, the character of true kingship will be fully displayed and fully realized. Even for kings, it's not about them. It's about a nation centered in Yahweh and the Messiah of Yahweh. And thus, it is about doing justice, loving each other tenderly, and walking humbly with one's God!

Psalm 132:1-18 is, from an historical standpoint, one of the most important psalms in the Psalter. It is important because it is the only place in scripture in which the Davidic covenant, with its conditions, is actually stated. In other places, it is alluded to or summarized, but never stated.

Psalm 132 is also important for its placing of the Davidic covenant in the much wider context of the four divisions to this psalm. The first part, Psalm 132:1-5, presents the rationale by David for being blessed by God – the hardships he has endured for the sake of Yahweh and the creation of the kingdom of Israel, and his pledge to find “a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Judah”. Behind those few verses lies quite a tale.

As suggested by this psalm, the two main accomplishments of David early in his monarchy was his taking of Jerusalem and making it the nation’s capital, (II Samuel 5:6-16) and his bringing of the ark of the covenant to the city (II Sam. 6:1-23). It is because of these two actions on David’s part that God then makes a covenant with David and David’s heirs that is so powerful that at times it seems to overshadow the covenant made with Moses (II Sam. 7:1-17). The first action is not mentioned in this psalm, but the second is strongly stressed. Yet the action of bringing the ark into the city has no context or makes no sense apart from the first action.

The first action David took after securing the joint monarchy of both Judah and Israel was to create a capital city. Much as the founding fathers of the United States created a new city to be the nation’s capital (thus, avoiding the offending of any of the states), so David decided to conquer a city not formerly held by either Judah or Israel, so as not to give offense to either. The city he chose to conquer was Urushalim.¹

After David conquered Urushalim, he renamed it “Jerusalem”. But this name change was far more than simply a change of names. As anyone knows who works with scripture, every name in the Bible has a meaning, and that meaning is meant to be taken seriously.

The name, Urushalim, means “foundation of Shalem”. That is, this city was dedicated to the Canaanite god, “Shalem”.² But who was “Shalem”? Shalem was the local god of pre-Israelite Canaan. It was the god symbolized in the planet Venus – the evening star. After the Israelite conquest, Shalem was identified with the Canaanite gods Ashtar and Molech. These gods were in reality the Canaanite manifestation of the “international” deity of all the mid-East except for Israel – the god “Ba’al”!

So how did the city gain the name, “Jerusalem”? When David conquered the city, he renamed it by inserting the prefix “Je” onto the name of the city. But what does the prefix “Je” mean? It is the anglicized version of the Hebrew word “Yah” and thus an abbreviation for the word “Yahweh”! When King David conquered Jerusalem, he added the name of his and Israel’s God

¹ The Canaanite name of the city that David conquered appears nowhere in the Bible, but the Egyptian Execration Texts (c. 1850 BCE) tells us it was named “Urushalim”. The name “Jerusalem” was given to the city by David following his conquest of it.

² The traditional interpretation of the name of Jerusalem as “city of peace” is etymologically unfounded and is a clear mistranslation of the Hebrew (cf. Millar Burrows, “Jerusalem” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 843).

to the name of a city that previously had been named for the God Shalem. The name Yahweh was not substituted for the name of Shalem; it was added to it!

In the very name “Jerusalem” is expressed both the tension of that city that would be acted out throughout its history and the tension of every city. It is *Je*-rusalem – the city of Yahweh, of God. But it is also *Jeru-salem* – the city of Ba’al (or Satan). Jerusalem is the city of Yahweh. Jerusalem is the city of Ba’al. It is a city that contains the power and influence of both forces within the walls. The very name of Israel’s primary (and idealized) city expresses the foundational message of the Bible. Jerusalem – and every city – is the battleground between God and Satan for domination of its people and their structures. And God’s people are to be engaged in that battle for God and His Kingdom!

Thus, by changing the name of his conquered capital, David has declared that this city is dedicated to Yahweh, even in the light of the recognition that God and Satan are always battling for domination.³ But how will David symbolize that his new capital city is, in fact, dedicated to Yahweh? Why, he brings the Ark of the Covenant to the city and establishes the tabernacle (later, the Temple) there to house that ark and to be the center of Israel’s worship of God.

Thus, David swears, “I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob” (vss. 3-5).

The psalm then moves into its second division (vss. 6-10), to tell the reader of the then-location of the ark that had been captured by the Philistines, released because of the danger it posed to that nation and then brought to Kiriath-Jearim (“the fields of Jaar”). David and his priests go to Kiriath-Jearim and lead the ark in procession back to the new capital of Jerusalem where it takes up residence in the tabernacle (tent of meeting) until the Temple is built in the reign of David’s successor (cf. II Sam. 6:1-23).

This event is particularly recited in this psalm because it is a reminder to Israel that it was the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem that confirmed the city as the “city of God” – the city in which God had particularly taken up residence! This significant event was apparently remembered each year before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE through a procession of the ark when it would be carried out from the Temple and beyond the city walls where it would be “discovered” by the king and then paraded in triumph back into the city and to the Temple. This annual ceremony thus commemorated this defining moment in Israel’s history.

The result of these two obedient actions on the part of David was God’s covenant made with that king and his progeny (cf. II Sam. 7:1-17). The third part of Psalm 132 is the stating of that covenant – the only place in the Bible where it so appears.

³ This statement is not to suggest that God and Satan are equally powerful forces. The Hebrew perspective was that God was supreme, and that Satan is a created being under God. But even though they are not equals, they battle each other for supremacy, much as a militarily weaker nation might do battle with a more powerful nation in hopes of defeating them.

The nature of a biblical covenant was that it was a sacred agreement between two parties in which each party made a commitment to do what he or she promises to do, and then stated what the conditions of that covenant were to be (e.g., if you don't do what you promise to do, what does that do to this covenant and/or the response of the other party to your infraction of the covenant). All other presentations of the Davidic Covenant in the scriptures only states what God will do. For example, in II Samuel 7:16, the covenant is summarized in these words: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever". But in Psalm 132, the conditions of that covenant are clearly stated.

"The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back" 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.' If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne" (132:11-12).

Here, clearly stated, is the condition. God promises David that he will secure his dynasty in the rule of Israel. But that is done on the condition that "your sons (will) keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them". David's successors, like David, are called to obedience to the Deuteronomical Law. They are to so govern Israel so that justice for all people, no matter how poor or weak, will be guaranteed. They are to govern Israel so that they will make certain that the nation's wealth will be equitably distributed "so that there will be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4). They are to govern Israel so that all the people, from the high priest to the smallest child, will live in relationship with God and will contribute to the building of a nation of people committed to the best for each other. And *if* David's descendants are faithful to that task, then God will guarantee the peace, unity and purity of the nation under a Davidic monarchy. But if they keep on breaking this covenant, then God is no longer obligated to abide by this covenant and will withdraw it. So this is a conditional covenant, eventually broken by God in his exile of Israel because of their continued breaking of that covenant for nearly 400 years before that exile (960-586 BCE).

This brings us to the final division of this psalm. Verses 13-18 presents God's choice of Jerusalem as the abode for his temple, and why he so chooses it.

"For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation: 'This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless its provisions; I will satisfy its poor with bread. Its priests I will clothe with salvation, and its faithful will shout for joy. There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one. His enemies I will clothe with disgrace, but on him, his crown will gleam'".

What the Psalmist puts into the mouth of God in God's blessing of Jerusalem is a description of the shalom of the city. It will be prosperous, its poor will be adequately cared for, salvation will be experienced by all its people, it will be centered in a relationship with God, it will be justly and wisely ruled and it will be victorious over all its enemies. All of this, God will grant to the city because its political and economic leaders will act justly, relationally and equitably. But will they?

John 18:33-37. This Sunday is known in the lectionary as “Christ the King Sunday”, the final Sunday of this Christian Year. But what is meant by the title, “Christ the King”, since Jesus never ruled an actual nation? The answer to that question is revealed in the Gospel lesson for today – Pilate’s trial of Jesus.

That trial begins with Jesus standing before Pilate, and Pilate asking, “Are you the king of the Jews” (18:33)? To catch the nuance of this statement, the emphasis must be upon the word “you”. “Is it *you* who are the king of the Jews?” To Pilate, there is only one “king of the Jews” – the puppet king Herod. He is astounded that the Jewish ecclesiastical/political/economic elite has brought this rag-tag peasant before the Roman governor on trial for treason against Rome. Is this the peasant that the Jewish authorities convinced Pilate to commit his Roman troops stationed in Jerusalem to arrest (see John 18:1-11)? Have they taken leave of their senses?

Jesus responds to Pilate’s sarcastic (and perhaps incredulous) comment with a statement that makes the procurator realize this is a more worthy opponent than he originally surmised. “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me” (vs. 34)?

Part of Rome’s capacity to govern the world effectively was based upon the perception of its objectivity, its unimpeachable authority, far above the fray of local petty politics. It was the great lawgiver of the world. Jesus shatters that façade of unimpeachable authority with these few words. In this sentence, Jesus reveals that he knows that the troops sent to arrest him were Pilate’s troops, and rather than Rome being the objective, unbiased power it pretends to be, it is an integral part of the plot to eliminate him. In essence, he is saying to the procurator, “Pilate, don’t play games with me. I know you and Rome are as much a part of the conspiracy to eliminate me and neutralize my movement as the priests of Judea are. Your hands are as covered with blood as is theirs”. Jesus exposes Rome for the manipulative, dominating power it truly is, locked in a cooperative embrace with all the local political, economic and religious systems and leaders to maintain dominance and control over the people, and to economically exploit and politically oppress them. Nothing has gotten by Jesus!

Pilate, astounded, seeks to distance himself and Rome from the Judean leaders. “I am not a Jew, am I?” he rhetorically asks. “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done” (v. 35)? But his attempt to evade Jesus’ exposure of him by trying to redirect blame onto the Jewish systems doesn’t work. Jesus, instead, moves to the heart of the issue.

“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 Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (18:36).

This is one of the most misinterpreted of the passages in the Gospel of John. It is usually interpreted as meaning that Jesus’ kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly kingdom and therefore the angels would not defend him when he is killed by the earthly authorities. However, that interpretation makes no sense in the light of the context of this passage – which is the conflict between the Roman-Jewish conspiracy (“Pilate’s world”) and Jesus’ jubilee community (“Jesus’ world”). Nor is it consistent with John’s use of the word “world” throughout the Gospel

(e.g., 1:9-29; 14:17-31; 15:18-19; 17:6-25). Throughout the book of John, the word “world” is used to refer to the Judean/Roman political, economic and religious systems.

What Jesus is actually saying in this response to Pilate, therefore is: “My kingdom is not made up of the values, structures and people of Rome’s political, economic and religious systems which are designed to oppress, exploit and dominate society for its own wealth and power. If my kingdom were this kind of society, committed to dominate and control the people, then of course my followers would rise up in revolt and seek to overthrow you by force. But my kingdom is not that kind of kingdom. It is a kingdom totally outside your capacity to understand, Pilate, because you understand power only as being unilateral and dominating, and you do not understand the power of relational love in community. So you and I, Pilate, come from two entirely different kingdoms, two entirely different perspectives of what society and life is to be about it, and thus two entirely different “worlds”.”

Pilate is confused, exasperated, and clearly out of his league – and he knows it! This conversation began with Jesus on trial. And now, in some way that Pilate simply doesn’t understand, the tables have been turned and Pilate finds himself and the Rome he represents on trial before this Jewish peasant! So not knowing how to respond to his accuser, all Pilate can do is to return to his old argument, “So you are a king” (v. 37a)?

But Jesus isn’t through with Pilate yet. He 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” (v. 37b). In other words, what Jesus says to Pilate is this: “If you want to use the metaphor of “king” to understand who I am, that’s all right with me. But I’m much more than that, Pilate. I am here even now – and on trial before you – for one purpose: to testify to the truth. I am one who reveals the world as God intended it to be and to call people like you to use your influence to return society to God’s intentions. That was why I was born. That is why I am here. And that is why you are here, also. Anyone who responds to my message and receives God’s intentions for our life together is a part of this new kingdom – this beloved community – of God’s truth!”

Pilate responds with his now famous line, peculiar only to the Gospel of John. “What is truth” (v. 38)? Pilate simply does not understand that Truth, embodied in this peasant Jesus whom he so despises, is standing in front of him!

Pilate’s moment of salvation, his opportunity -- both as a human being and as a high government official to embrace an entirely different way for himself and society – passes by! The door of salvation opportunity now shuts. The conversation is ended. And Pilate is found guilty!

Revelation 1:4-8 is, in reality, the opening of a letter! The standard form for the opening of a formal letter written at the time this biblical book was written, was as follows. First, the letter’s author is named (“John” – 1:4a). Second, the person or group to whom the letter is written is also named (“to the seven churches that are in Asia” – 1:4b). Third, a greeting is given by the author to those receiving the letter (“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the

faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” – 1:4c). Finally, a classical letter would end its opening with thanksgiving or praise or commendation being given for those receiving the letter (in this case, verses 5-8 are an opening doxology).

Thus, it is clear that the author “John” sees this book as a public letter sent to the seven churches in the region that now makes up the nation of Turkey. As a letter, it is meant to be read aloud to the assembled congregations, and to do so in one reading. Thus, the particulars of that letter (in this case, the commendation and critique made of each of the churches, the description of the end of the age, the fate of Rome and the dawning of the New Jerusalem) are not meant to be carefully parsed and dissected, as much as the letter is meant to provide a gestalt – a broad picture of how God is at work during the approaching end of the age (consonant with the failing of the Roman Empire), just as God was at the creation of the world. And this gestalt is being presented to the church so that all who hear that message might make appropriate response as they would seek to act faithfully for Christ and His Kingdom.

What is significant about this greeting and thanksgiving, however, is what it tells us about Jesus Christ. The author calls Jesus:

- ? “the faithful witness” (vs. 4);
- ? “the firstborn of the dead” (4);
- ? “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (4);
- ? the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood” (5);
- ? the one who “made us to be a kingdom (of) priests serving his God and Father” (6);
- ? the one who “is coming with the clouds” (7);
- ? the one “who every eye will see – even those who pierced him” (7);
- ? “the Alpha and the Omega” (8);
- ? the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (8);
- ? “the Almighty” (8) – a term normally reserved for God alone!

The list is quite a formidable list. This Jesus, in the eyes of the author of Revelation, is no mere mortal. He is not even an extraordinary mortal, a good man, a prophet, a priest, even a Messiah. What is presented here is the highest Christology. This is a Christ who rules over every principality and power, over all political, economic and religious systems and their leaders, and rules even over all and each of us.

Consider the words used to describe this Jesus: the one “who is coming with the clouds”, “the Alpha and Omega”, the one “who is and who was and who is to come”, “the Almighty”! This is, in every way, Christ the King – the One who is one with God and thus is “God of very God”.

The particularly cogent phrase used by John to describe Jesus is “Alpha and Omega”. The phrases “who is and who was and who is to come” and “the Almighty” are simply elaborations or commentary upon those two words. The “alpha” is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the “omega” is the final letter of that alphabet. Thus, John is saying that Jesus’ place in the universe covers from “a” to “z”. He is the creator of the universe (“alpha”), and he is the one who ushers in the new heaven and the new earth – the world as God intended it to be, as described in this book of Revelation (“omega”). Jesus is sovereign over all creation – from its

very origins to the fulfillment of God's purposes in the world's (and society's and each individual's) re-creation.

This is John's magnificent description of the One whose coming we await in Advent, the One who comes as "good news of great joy to all the peoples" as the babe in Bethlehem, before whom even the wise bow during Epiphany, whose life and ministry we celebrate during the season of Lent, the One who was betrayed and tried and executed during Holy Week and who rose from the dead at Easter, the One who introduced His Spirit to his people the Church at the feast of Pentecost; the One who, during "Ordinary Time", sent them out into an ordinary world to proclaim and act out God's intentions for that society. This is the One whom we now honor at the close of the Christian Year as "Christ the King" – the king of the universe, of society as God created it to be and even Christ *our* king as we personally and as Christ's body conclude our celebration of the One who has made "all things new"! This is Christ the King Sunday – the end of the Christian Year.

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