The First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia
Rev. Dr. Baron Mullis
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1 Samuel 23:1-7; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Christ the King

I confess I struggle with the concept of kings; perhaps it is because it is so, well, undemocratic. Monarchy may well have its merits, but I'm skeptical. I'm pretty sure that the only way I could support the concept would be if I were, in fact, the king. I feel the same way, by the way, about bishops.

There is something about the concept of kingship that the egalitarian must necessarily question, which renders terms such as "Christ the King," almost irrelevant for us today, in our context. "Kingship" isn't in our cultural vernacular. And yet, claims of the kingship of Christ are riddled throughout the New Testament. It is the language of faith to declare that Christ is king.

If we are the subjects of the kingdom of Christ, then we must begin to put some sort of flesh onto this rather esoteric concept. Perhaps the best starting place would be Jesus's own description.

My kingdom is not of this world, says Jesus.

I'm not sure that's quite as helpful as we need it to be.

So, let's take a step back.

Let's look at what Jesus does *not* mean, and to do so, we will consider what his hearers might have understood about kingship. Then we need to look at what our modern political constructs might suggest to us about sovereignty, and finally, what it might mean to participate in a kingdom that is "not of this world."

So, let's start with our own understanding of kingship. I don't think it's too simplistic to say that our understanding of monarchy probably comes more from royal weddings, and maybe the opening of parliament than anywhere else. To the extent we see monarchs, they are constitutional monarchs and not a political force.

Not so, by a long shot, in the time of Christ. Kings ruled through the exercise of power and the exertion of control. No, the king in the time of Christ is a mighty warrior, or at least was a mighty warrior at the time he came to power and was a wily politician by the time he was too old to go into battle. The king, in short, was David. To understand what Jesus' hearers would have thought about when they heard the term king, we have to understand David.

To be sure they had their fill of slimy characters as king. The king at the time of Jesus' life was a half-breed Jew who was a puppet of the Roman state who cared little about the religious, economic and physical welfare of the people he ruled. Herod was an oily little despot, a pint-

sized dictator in the Roman milieu. He was king in name, but he didn't represent *kingship* – not to the Jews. For that, they looked to their past, to David.

Between us, I always get a little amused when folks talk about wanting Biblical morality as a standard of behavior because the only thing Biblical about David's morality was the proportion of his transgressions.

But, despite his tabloid-fodder home life, which has to be read to be believed, David does represent the high-water mark of kingship in the life of ancient Israel. If you want to know what a good king looks like, you look to David.

David was king when the treasury was as full as it ever would be, the borders were as broad as they ever would be – signs of God's favor were everywhere. So much was David God's favored one that God made a covenant that an heir of David would forever sit on the throne of Israel.

Except that it wasn't an heir of David on the throne of Israel.

So, *David* is who the hearers of Jesus would have been looking for.

But what about us? To be sure, none of us are laboring under the impression that our government is sovereign over all of our lives. And whatever we think about individual politicians, the basic form of government is such that, no matter which party is in power, the basic day in, day out form of our lives is not dictated by a military state.

Our view of sovereignty is very different from the time of Jesus. Sovereignty represented a supreme and independent power the wielded control over life and death. The power to declare who lives and dies is wielded by the state, by its representatives and whether capricious or just, the assent of the governed is irrelevant.

"My kingdom is not of this world," says Jesus. It echoes after the words are finished.

David I can understand. Herod I can understand. Queen Elizabeth I can understand. The American congress I can sort of understand. But, "Not of this world," is a bit of a challenge for me.

What does it all mean?

There are clues to us of what this kingdom looks like. I wonder sometimes if our moments of life in the kingdom are so fleeting as to only be there for a moment, a brief reminder of this other allegiance we carry, sort of like years ago when I was in a department store and I caught a whiff of the perfume my grandmother used to wear and I looked around to see who it might be and I was reminded of all the wonderful memories I have of her. I couldn't hold the moment, I could only savor it. I wonder if this kingdom that is not of this world is perhaps only visible in our peripheral vision. If we look too hard for it, it vanishes, not to be contained.

That which is wholly other is not reducible to the written or spoken word. In other words, we cannot describe the kingship of Christ, we can only experience it and share it.

The kingship of Christ exceeds any earthly metric of kingship, which is why all of our concepts of kingdom and sovereignty will ultimately fail as analogies for what it means to follow the son of God.

In Reinhold Niebuhr's classic, The Irony of American History, he turns our understanding of Christ's crucifixion on its head. Niebuhr reminds us that Christ was crucified by the priests of the purest form of religion and executed by the minions of the most just form of the law. The temple establishment in Jerusalem was the most pure form of monotheism of all expressions of faith. The law of the Roman empire, while draconian by our standards, represented the pinnacle of justice in its day.

The most pure religion and the most just law could not grasp the kingship of Christ, "not of this world." As Niebuhr puts it, "They cannot distinguish between a criminal and the Saviour because each violates the law and customs which represented some minimal order, too low for the Savior and too high for the criminal."[1]

To be sure, Niebuhr's primary points in this particular book are political and relevant to the political context of 1951. However, he captures the essence of a kingdom, "not of this world," in these remarks:

"The Christian faith is centered in a person who was 'The stone which the builders rejected' and who became the 'head of the corner.' The sick are preferred to the healthy, as the sinners are preferred to the righteous, because their lack of health prompts them to an humility which is the prerequisite of every spiritual achievement. The poor are blessed and a 'woe' is pronounced upon the rich for the same reason. For as wealth and power lead to pride, so weakness and poverty tend to remind men of the limits of human achievement. The ironic success which issues from the various types of failure in Biblical thought is of course, not a success which is recorded in history. It belongs to a transcendent divine judgment of Him 'who resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.' It is the symbol of the potential contradiction between all historic achievement and the final meaning of life."[2]

But the talk of preference should be at least a little scary if we're relatively healthy and relatively wealthy.

It would be easy, even facile, in considering Niebuhr's insight to equate preference to judgment and exclusion. This is not the case. Preference is not to be understood exclusively. It is to be understood lovingly.

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[1] Niebuhr, Reinhold. The Irony of American History. P160

[2] Ibid, p 162

It is as if a parent had three children. Two are perfectly healthy. With good parenting and little good luck, they will grow up to be successful, productive and fulfilled. The third child, though, has special needs of some sort. Save through the extraordinary effort of those who love the child, she is expected to mature to a life that represents considerably less fulfillment. What good parent, the weight of the biblical narrative asks, would not spend *more* energy, intelligence, imagination and love seeking the good of *that* child?

In the economy of the Kingdom of Christ, this is preference.

My kingdom is not of this world, says Jesus.

Understood rightly, the kingship of Christ lays aside any such constraints of earthly kingship. "You want me to do it this way," Jesus seems to say, "Well my kingdom doesn't work that way. You want me to let the strongest dominate, to lend credence to the survival of the fittest? Well my kingdom protects the weakest. You want to give grace based upon whomever is the most moral? In my kingdom, grace manifests itself where it is most needed. "My kingdom is not of this world", says Jesus, and the implication is that if we would apply our standards of kingship to his rule, we are not citizens of his kingdom.

Take Pilate for instance. Noted Jesuit scholar Raymond Brown casts him in another light. "We would look on the Johannine Pilate not as the personification of the State, but as another representative of a reaction to Jesus that is neither faith nor rejection. Pilate is typical, not of the State that would remain neutral, but of the many honest, well-disposed [people] men who would try to adopt a *middle* position in a struggle that is *total*."[3]

The question of the kingship of Christ is a question of allegiance. It is a nagging question that cannot go away, cannot be set aside, cannot be rendered moot. It is this question: is my action pleasing to Jesus Christ?

That is the question that has dogged me all though my sentient life of faith, whether or not my behavior has any place in the kingdom of Christ. Perhaps you have wondered such things?

The good news of the Gospel is that God has chosen all of us to be subjects of this kind of kingdom.

This is the point in the sermon where I wish I had a story, preferably a tear-jerker, that will cement the concept of the kingship of Christ in your mind for the week to come, perhaps for longer. The problem is the kingdom of Christ is not of this world.

You see, the problem is the kingship of Christ places demands upon us. As Pilate represents the neutrality of neither faith nor rejection, so an otherworldly kingdom also gives us no solid parameters for its faithful adherence. It's almost as though Jesus says to us, "I want you to follow me," which of course, he did say, "And there isn't a doctrine or creed that will ever

[3] Brown, Raymond. The Gospel According to John in Anchor Bible Commentary. P864

perfectly define what that means. My kingdom is not of this world, so you're going to have to do the best you can, determining on a case-by-case basis what it is that I would have you do in my kingdom. And you'll get it wrong more than you'll get it right, but the calling never ends. Hey, don't worry, I'll be with you. Oh, but that, incidentally, means you're going to face ridicule for your beliefs from time to time, you're going to have to advocate on behalf of those you have to work really hard some days just to be able to love and odds are good you're going to throw up both hands regularly wondering, 'Can I possibly be getting it right if this is what the kingdom looks like?' But I will be with you."

"Yes," Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world."

So, like I said, there's no story to haunt you in your life of faith this week, but rather a question:

Is Christ *really* king?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.