

“Why Speak of Kingdoms? A ‘Dear John’ Letter”

Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2018

Based upon Revelation 1:4-8

Dear John,

We’ve received your greeting here at Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church. “Grace to you and peace from him who is and was and is to come. . . .” Let me be clear. I understand that you were not writing specifically to Prince of Peace. You were writing to seven churches in Asia at the end of the first century. It never ceases to amaze me though how words written so long ago for a different time and place can also be for us the Word of God bringing hope and encouragement in challenging times.

And they were challenging times for your people. Christians were enduring persecution at the hand of the emperor, Domitian. In a time of great oppression, you were both pastor and prophet for your people giving them a vision of the kingdom of God and shaping their consciousness for how to live as followers of Jesus in a time when other rulers were exercising power and domination at every turn.

But about that, John, it’s a little difficult for us to fathom kingdoms and what that was like in your day. We still have them, only about 43 in today’s world, and with most of those monarchies, the king or queen is either a figurehead with little political power or an authoritarian despot that uses power over the people not for the benefit of the people but to insure reign and their status.

You remember Herod? Well, we have some “Herods” in today’s world. It’s daunting and scary what power can do to our thinking. Holding power can lead to actions that abuse and ignore all process and impede life giving freedoms rights and liberties.

So, to speak of Jesus as “king” and language around the “kingdom of God” can be challenging for us to wrap our heads around and an even harder concept to explain to our friends and family who don’t practice, but may want to learn about the Christian faith. Is there a better image than king and kingdom?

Yet, it’s right here, John, in your letter, “Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth.” And it’s not the first time in our scriptures that Jesus is referred to as a king.

Also, here we are at worship on the day known as Christ the King Sunday. And the pastor is away, and I am supposed to preach today’s sermon.

Oh, you don’t know about Christ the King Sunday, do you? Well, it started in 1925, a long time after you wrote to those churches. In 1925, many nations were facing uncertain futures. Oppressive dictators were on the rise, and great depressions were at doorsteps. The leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius XI, (Oh, I’m sorry, John, you don’t know about Protestant and Catholic, do you or the Reformation? Well, I’ll explain all that in another letter.) Anyway, Pope

Pius XI asserted that despite all the oppressive dictators rising as leaders with all their false values that Christians needed to reclaim Jesus as their Lord and King and live as his followers in ways that show a different kind of power, a different kind of king.

These earthly kings would pass away in time, but Christ would never pass away. His reign is eternal, and he is the ruler of all the kings of the earth. Just like what you said in your letter at the end of the first century. To help Christians reclaim Jesus as their king, Christ the King Sunday was instituted as part of the liturgical year. It's the last Sunday on the liturgical calendar. With Advent, which begins next week, we start a new liturgical year.

But back to Christ the King Sunday, I thought writing this letter might help me explain what we mean when we speak of Christ as our king because we are not talking about power over people. The only power Christ wanted anything to do with was the power of **love**. The only crown Jesus ever wore was a crown of thorns. The only throne Jesus ever sat upon was at a dinner table with sinners or a rock wall by a well talking to a Samaritan woman or a big uncomfortable stone as Jesus told the disciples to "Let the children come."

In fact, Jesus didn't really sit very much. He was on the move a lot and he had to rely on people to give him a place to stay. There were no kingly suites at the Hilton offered to Jesus. There was no throne, no palace.

We worship a different kind of king, and that matters.

Back in 1998, there was a movie (Oh John, that's right, you don't know about movies either, do you? Well, another letter....) Anyway, this movie was called "The Man in The Iron Mask." The factual basis for the story is questionable, but it makes a valid point about who we should look to as real leaders.

The plot revolves around Louis XIV, king of France from 1643 until his death in 1715, and his twin brother, Philippe. Louis imprisons Philippe and has him wear an iron mask so no one can see that he is the king's identical twin. The king does not want to be confused with anyone. He wants it clear that HE is the king.

Well, these four Musketeers help Philippe escape prison and the iron mask.

The people see Philippe walking around and think it's their king who has come to be among the people. They are shocked because he is not acting like the King Louis that they know and don't necessarily love. Philippe bends to lift a lady after she has tripped and fallen in the road. Philippe speaks with tenderness and compassion to a family whose son had been used and abused by Louis. Philippe goes to the poor section of the city bringing food and blankets with him. The people are shocked and confused as this behavior is nothing like what they have observed from their king. It's soon discovered by the people that this person doing all these gestures of kindness and caring is not their king. He's a fake!

Or is he? Maybe he's not the fake king. Maybe Philippe is the real king according to Jesus' idea of kingship.

So, John, have you heard about Italy? There's an Italian Christmas story written in 1896, called "The Dream of Christmas" by Luigi Pirandello.

The time is Advent, and there are celebrations everywhere, in every church, in every home, around the hearth, by the manger, sounds of bagpipes and children and games, and people hurrying down the street and wishing each other "Merry Christmas" as they passed. The first-person narrator of this story makes it home, tired after all the celebrating and busyness leading up to Christmas, and he falls into dream.

In his dream he comes upon Jesus. The rest of the world seems to be celebrating Christmas, but Jesus is looking pallid, withdrawn, and sorrowful as he looks at the places in the world that are not hearing and experiencing God's message of hope and grace and salvation and love.

Jesus starts to walk, and in the dream the narrator begins to follow him. Jesus stops and visits the poorest doorways where Christmas offered no occasion for merriment. Jesus turns and says, "For these too, I died..."

They then visit a magnificent church, marbled and gold thronged by the faithful with worship services being conducted by officiants in clouds of incense and brocades of chasubles. Jesus turns and says, "For these too, I died and it would give me such great pleasure to be truly born again in all of these."

As they left the church, Jesus turns to his follower and says, "I am seeking a soul to be born in again. It could be yours. It could be anyone's as long as their heart is open and not crowded."

In the dream, the man said ashamedly, "I can't Jesus. It's a busy time."

John, this story made me think about where Jesus would want to visit if he came to earth this day. Would we not only take him there even if it was a hard place for us, but could he be reborn again and live in us that God's light might shine through the darkness?

What are the places our Lord and our King would want to visit if he walked this earth today?

What will we say when Jesus asks, "Can I live in you? Can I be born again in you so that together we can go where my message is needed, where hope has been lost, where strength can't be found, where grace and forgiveness is absent, where truth to power is not spoken because people honor and worship other kinds of kings?"

Yes, John! Christ the King Sunday gives us an occasion to reclaim Jesus, a different kind of king. It gives us the opportunity to ask:

Who rules our lives? How do we balance loyalty to earthly powers with the kingdom of God that calls for ultimate loyalty?

With Christ as our King, what is our response to leaders who manipulate truth for their own power? Whose example of truth do we follow?

What are your thoughts, John? Are these good questions for our time? Are these good questions for all times? On this Christ the King Sunday and as we head into Advent, can we reclaim Jesus and embody the power of love in the lives we live and the choices we make? Who will be our King?

Across time and space, we return to you, John, the grace and peace of Christ.

To God be the glory!

With Love,
Your saints at Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church