

*Jesus is King*

This morning I'd like to focus on a particular verse in our gospel reading, John chapter six. Verses one to fourteen of chapter six tell us how Jesus miraculously fed a huge crowd from only five barley loaves and two fish, and had twelve baskets full of leftovers. This miracle of food multiplication is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. In verses sixteen to twenty-one we hear about Jesus walking on the water. Another incredible miracle! But tucked in between these two great miracle stories is easily overlooked verse number fifteen. This verse reports that the crowd wanted to take Jesus by force and make him king. However, Jesus would was not going to allow that to happen and he withdrew from the crowd.

Why would Jesus do that? What would be so wrong with having Jesus as our king? You would think having Jesus as king would be a good thing. The crowd reasoned, quite logically, that it would be great to have a king who could create bread from virtually nothing at all. They would never have to go hungry again. The crowds desire for bread, and for a king who can provide an abundance of bread, becomes even clearer when we consider that bread represented for them in that time all that was good and necessary in life. It's really not so different from our understanding and our language today.

In the 1960s people started using the word "bread" as slang for money, as in "I need some bread to fix my car, man." Then in the 1990s they started using the word "money" to mean anything excellent, as in "My new car is da

money.” When we pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we are not just asking God for our daily recommended allowance of grain products. We are asking Him for everything we need to survive: food, shelter, medical care, employment, and so on. So when we pray for daily bread we’re really asking God for everything excellent and necessary. It’s easy for us to appreciate how ancient people, living under the constant threat of famine and poverty, would want a king who could supply all their physical and material needs.

We would like a king like that too, I’m sure. Wouldn’t it be great to have a king who could turn the economy around with a few magic words! Perhaps even beyond a bread-producing king, we today would like a king to be our social and moral compass. We would like a king to tell us unequivocally what is right and what is wrong. We want a king who is going to uphold and enforce law and order. Wouldn’t we expect Jesus to be that kind of king for us? Or if Jesus himself wouldn’t rule over us personally, couldn’t we at least expect a king hand selected by God to lead and defend us? The surprising answer is, “Maybe not!”

Early in history God’s people, the Hebrews, had no king. From the time of Abraham, through the era of Israel and his twelve sons, through the time of Moses, and for a thousand years after Moses, God’s people, Israel, had no earthly king. God himself was their only king. At first, when the people wanted a human king like all the other nations, God said “No!” God warned them what a king would do them, drafting their sons for his army and taking their produce in taxes, but the people persisted in their request and finally

God consented. Sometimes God teaches us a lesson by giving us what we ask for.

Saul was Israel's first king and his reign started off good but ended badly. God then gave the throne to man after his own heart, David, and David and his son Solomon had glorious reigns. But after Solomon things fell apart and the succession of kings that followed him were both good and bad, but mostly bad. Still, the hope persisted that someday God would raise up another king from David's royal line. We Christians see Jesus as the fulfillment of that prophecy, but he is most certainly not a king like David. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. And by spiritual I do not mean "not real." Jesus' kingdom is "more real than real" but we have to stretch our earth-bound human minds a bit to comprehend it. King Jesus has no throne but the human heart. He has no army but the legions of Christians devoted to him. The kingdom of Christ exists wherever his name is known, and we are his loyal subjects, charged with spreading his sovereign reign. We don't have visible weapons or palaces or borders, but we do have Jesus' presence, his Spirit among us.

Could it be then that God raises up certain leaders, perhaps kings and queens, to serve Him and the interests of His realm? That was the theory behind what was known as "the Divine Right of Kings." Centuries ago it was believed that kings were kings because God chose them to be kings. A king's power, then, was absolute and unquestionable. The king represented God on earth and wielded God's power, or so it was said. It's hard to look at

history and believe that all the kings were God's men when we see their corruption and abuses of power. Our American system of government was built precisely on the rejection of the Divine Right of Kings and the idea of the reins of government being passed down father to son in a monarchy.

Our Declaration of Independence states that, "... all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights by their Creator." There is no American royal family. We do not bow to the nobility. Of course, while Mr. Thomas Jefferson was writing that all men are created equal, he himself was a slaveholder and fathering children by one of his slaves. While officially a Christian, Mr. Jefferson wrote a biography of Jesus that left out anything he thought was supernatural, such as the miraculous feeding of the crowd, Jesus walking on water, and the Resurrection. For Mr. Jefferson, Jesus was just a moral teacher, but nothing more. That just goes to show that even a brilliant man like Mr. Jefferson can be dead wrong. People don't go willingly to martyrdom for someone who taught nice ethics. Quaint moral teachers don't get hung from crosses. Jesus' spiritual kingdom must have been, and still is, at odds with the kingdoms of the world.

Too often we have been too quick to christen our political opinions and claim them to be what God commands. Too often we have been too quick to declare our candidate as God's chosen for the job and the other candidate a demon. Our tendency is to think that whatever is good for me must be God's will. A couple of years ago The Lutheran magazine had a cover that said, "God is not a Republican or a Democrat," and they took a lot of heat over that because we all just naturally assume that God is on our party's side. It seems to me that every party and every candidate has their good

points and bad points. No one is perfect, no one is always right, and sometimes the most unlikely people do well for us in office and the most likely people fail miserably. It also seems to me that God is usually against the *status quo* and for the underdog. God is constantly working for change for the better, and He will accomplish what He wants when He wants regardless of who's in office or what the current political climate is. But undoubtedly the current political climate is not all that favorable for Christians.

Did you read the article in last Sunday's newspaper about the Assembly of God pastor who was invited to give the opening invocation before the legislature at the Pennsylvania State House in Harrisburg? He was instructed to make the prayer non-denominational and non-controversial, which he really did try to do. However, the prayer he submitted for approval ended with, "In Jesus' name we pray," and he was told that was unacceptable, Jesus' name was offensive. Jesus name was offensive! The pastor chose not to give the opening invocation at all if he could not name Jesus. Several attorneys have contacted him about suing, but he has declined. He said he was only doing a favor for a parishioner, a State Representative, and he doesn't want to cause a big fuss.

I can appreciate his dilemma. Each year I'm called upon to give a benediction at an event that might be described as spiritual and interfaith. Usually I address my prayer to "the one God and Father of us all," even knowing that name might not be acceptable to everyone there. The majority of those gathered there are Christian, but what about the minority? How do can I respect their beliefs and still be true to my beliefs? Is that possible?

The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees us two things: One, that the government shall not establish a state religion, and two, that the government shall not prohibit the free exercise of religion. Does the First Amendment give me freedom to preach on the sidewalk at the Miracle Mile with a bullhorn if I chose? Does your First Amendment freedom give you the right to take away my bullhorn if you don't want to listen to me? Can I force you to give your child a life-saving blood transfusion or a vaccination, even if that is against your religious beliefs? Can I practice polygamy and marry multiple wives if that is what I understand the Bible to tell me to do? These are tough questions. No wonder Jesus didn't want to be king!

Actually, if we only took Jesus at his word, these would not be such big problems. If we took Jesus' advice and always treated others as we want to be treated, that would solve a lot of our practical real life problems, but perhaps not all of them. There would still be some disagreements, I suppose. If we could be loving and forgiving like Jesus, that might defuse even more of those persistent problems. And if our hearts were set on the eternal rather than the finite, that would change our perspective to be more like Christ's. The trouble is, we're not very good at being like Jesus. We easily break into parties and factions. We frequently judge others harshly and often don't judge ourselves at all. We don't see the big picture. On our own we cannot do much right. Our only hope is in Christ and the goodness he so generously gives us like miraculous bread from his hands.

When Jesus fed the crowds, he fed the worthy and the worthy. He fed those who "got it" and those who didn't. Sadly few understood, but Jesus is

patient. He'll wait for us to come to him, but in the mean time he won't acquiesce to our to our unholy desires for the bread that perishes. He won't let himself be defined by our politics and temporary controversies. His kingdom is bigger than that.

Jesus sends us, his faithful subjects, out now, to serve and to witness. We are to feed people's physical bodies, and we have a good many programs and ministries that do just that. Of course, we don't trade bread for conversions, but we are to also feed people's souls, not just their bodies, as well. We are to name the name of Jesus as we serve. As I like to say, "If we give the world bread, but withhold Jesus, then we have failed to give them the best thing we have to offer." I look forward to a day when I won't have to say that anymore because our efforts will be complete and everyone will know Jesus. One day every knee will bow and acknowledge Jesus as our God and king. And as reminder of how we are to serve and witness, Jesus himself will come to us soon in the bread and the wine. Blessed be the bread of life; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.