

Christ the King 2003

Daniel 7:9-14

Psalm 93

Revelation 1:1-8

John 18:33-37

3000 or so years ago, before there were kings like David and Solomon and Josiah, the Israelites were a people without kings. It was said, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Apparently, that did not work too well. What was right in some people's eyes was not right in others. And so, the Israelites found judges who acted on behalf of the people and God. But even that did not work well with the people. The Israelites wanted to be like the other nations, wanted a monarch, a king. So, the people went to Samuel, Judge, and asked that he appoint a King to rule over all Israel. They said in such kind terms, and I quote, "Look, [Samuel,] you are old, and your sons do not follow in your footsteps. Now appoint for us a king to rule us like all the nations." And Samuel was rendered a lame-duck judge. In fact, at that moment, all judges became lame Quackers.

Samuel was a little hesitant to choose a king, not only for reasons of job-security, but because he also did not know where having a king would lead the people of Israel. He questioned whether or not a King might take the people's focus from God. But Samuel went to God with the request anyway. God was also not content with Israel having a king. The Lord, though, begrudgingly acquiesced saying, "Listen to the voice of the people...; for they have not rejected you [Samuel], but me they have rejected from being king over them," God had been the people's leader, that was all that was needed. Despite concerns, God agreed to the request like a parent allowing a child to stay out past curfew. Only God told Samuel this, "Only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them," suggesting that even God in those days could be passive-aggressive: (1 Samuel 8:9)

And Samuel warned the Israelites at the suggestion of God. He, in perhaps sour-grapes, bitter loser fashion decreed, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you... He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards... and give them to his courtiers.... He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to work.... And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves." (1 Samuel 8:10-18). I guess such decrees could also apply to presidents! ... "But the people refused to listen to... Samuel; they said, "No! But we are determined to have a king over us."

The people were heard, and they got kings in the form of Saul and David and a whole host of others. But even that did not calm the public. As much as the people loved building up kings, proclaiming military victory, putting them on pedestals, and hoping that their kingdom would bring them great prosperity and favor with God, they also loved seeing the kings fall from grace, as did Saul as David rose to power, as did even David with his adultery, as did Solomon with his oppression of so many while he built the Temple, as did most kings. The Kings did, for the most part, perform as Samuel had predicted. And the people eventually wanted them out. Even the unity of Israel that David, the greatest king, sought was destroyed within a generation.

Why do I belabor the history of Kings in Israel and their sordid relationship with both the people and with God? Well, today is the last Sunday of the Christian Year. Advent begins a new year. And on the Last Sunday of the year, we traditionally hear stories about the Kingship of Christ. It is a preparation to remember our Prince of Peace as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. But to understand the Kingship of Christ and even understand why we celebrate the Feast of Christmas, we have to understand the kings, like David, to understand why Jesus represented something new.

In today's Gospel, we hear from John, and we see Jesus encountering Pilate in a trial. And it is an odd event to see an earthly almost king meet a real king from heaven. And Pilate, from his position of power, and yet great insecurity, looks at Jesus squarely and asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks the question to set a trap. He knows that if Jesus says yes that Jesus would legally be seen as a threat to the Roman Peace and could be executed without guilt. And Jesus does respond to Pilate, does not shy away from Pilate's simpering efforts to condemn the real king. But Jesus does not answer Pilate's question. Instead, he answers a question more like, "Are you, Jesus, like the other kings of Israel and the other kings of the world?" And Jesus answers that question because he says, "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." In other words, Jesus is a King but not like they think.

The old Kings, even the Roman Emperors, raised themselves up with military victories and then were plunged into the remnants of history by their human faults, their Achilles' heels. Jesus takes a different approach. Instead of physically trying to demand control over all of us, he gives up every last bit of his own control. He even gives up his will to God, saying, "Not my will, but yours." And Jesus allows himself to be treated as no other king would. He permits others, including Pilate, to plunge him into the depths of death because they think it will bring order. And he founded a new kingdom based on that: giving up control in order to serve one another and realizing that despite our fear of doing just that, giving ourselves up for one another, God always brings us, like Jesus, back to life, back to community, and back to the peace of God. .

A while back, Natalie Angiers, the *New York Times* writer and Pulitzer Prize winning biologist, asked the question, "Is War our Biological Destiny?" Are might and overt power the only way of ordering our world? Will Pilate always be in a position to kill Jesus? Ms. Angiers offers two paradigms for human action. They are based on different cultures of other primates.

The first deals with "common chimpanzees, which share about 98 percent of their genes with humans... [They] wage war [like humans]: gangs of neighboring males meet at the borderline of their territories with the express purpose of exterminating their opponents [on this weekend of football games, perhaps this is one possibility]. [But for chimps] So many males are lost to battle that the sex ratio among adult chimpanzees is two females for every male

However, there are other archetypes. [like the]... hamadryas baboons?... If you throw a peanut in front of a male... [this sort of baboon] will pick it up happily and eat it. Throw the same peanut in front of two male baboons, and they'll ignore it. "They'll act as if it doesn't exist,... It's not worth a fight between two fully grown males."

Ms. Angiers argues that we have hope in our society because animals that are just as related to us as Chimpanzees have dealt with living as a community differently than the chimpanzees or even man. Hopefully, you are asking yourselves, "Is Jesus a baboon in this scenario?" And the answer is yes. Given the choice to claim his authority over the universe through power and warrior like bravery or through radical and abandoning love, Jesus chose the latter. He refused to pick up the peanut. Because he did, we have a strong hope, a deeper hope than even a baboon could give, that there are other ways to live on this earth than force and might and that there is another type of kingdom of the horizon.

The people of Israel had a long tradition of wanting a king who could come and save the people. Each time, with all of the hopes, they were disappointed. And so we get to Jesus, who never said he would save us in the same ways as David. Instead, he teaches and shows us how to save ourselves, not by saving only our own selves but with the love of God teaching us how to love one another, and how to come back to one another, not with military strength, but with forgiveness. This is the crucified and risen king that we worship each week. And the reason that we worship him, is that we endeavor for him not to come and rule us, but for him to be amongst us to help us be like him.