

He's Still the King
Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 23:1-7, John 18:33-37

Scripture

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "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." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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."

Sermon

Plymouth Colony was a small group - smaller than we usually think. But what kept them going was faithfulness to their king - their different king.

They called themselves "separatists." We call them "pilgrims." They would serve God as their Lord before they would yield allegiance to any other - including the Lord of the realm, the British monarch. They had faced persecution from church and king, and they had gone to hiding and then to fleeing. In 1620, they managed a commercial contract in the new world, and they made a compact aboard the little ship along the way - the Mayflower Compact. Not everyone signed it. Of the 70 adult passengers, only 27 were religious "Pilgrims" - the rest were servants and "adventurers" - people interested in the land and the freedom, not the religious purity.

Most of them survived stormy seas and arrived months late in late December. Bad weather delayed needed building. Freezing and starving and disease took their toll. In the fall of 1621, half of the original 102 adults and children were dead. Only four of the women survived. In the face of those realities, they did an amazing thing. They celebrated! They organized a three day "harvest festival" with the natives who had saved them - 53 pilgrims and 90 natives gathered to share what they had, and to give thanks.

We cannot imagine what suffering and hardship the few survivors endured - the pilgrims and the others. But we can learn from their spirit. In the face of hardship and death, they trusted God. We face less and could trust God more. They saw the high cost as the price of faithfulness and duty to their king - their different king. We could be more faithful to Christ. We could honor a sense of duty to each other. We could celebrate and give thanks, because he is our king.

Sitting here this morning - and most everyone sitting in a church in America this morning - owe those 27 pilgrims a great debt. Most all of the colonies were founded as commercial enterprises or royal expansions. We Presbyterians are the benefactors of our cousins the Puritans, and that strange group who started Pennsylvania, the Society of Friends. Our Scots ancestors came later to Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia was the first Presbytery on American soil.

We were told in school that American was founded so that we could “be free to worship as we pleased.” We owe most of that to the founders who sided with Jefferson and Madison many years later. What we need to understand about the Pilgrims of Plymouth on Christ the King Sunday is that they did NOT “worship as they pleased.” They did not make the journey and face death to do what they pleased. They came to be subjects of Christ the King more than James the King. They saw freedom as freedom to serve God alone. They saw freedom as freedom to do what Christ wanted. They worshiped to please Christ. Christ was still the king.

So that first autumn they gathered in the middle to their trouble and sorrow and facing another winter to look back and realize they were better off than last winter - and to give thanks to God. I doubt that surviving band of separatists and adventurers, natives and invaders held hands like we do at our house every Thanksgiving, but all of them said prayers in their way and sang some hymns in their way and thanked God for a bountiful table with a joyful heart. Come Thursday around a bountiful table, pray and give thanks for Christ’s blessings with a joyful heart.

Jesus is still a king, and he rules over a spiritual kingdom of right living, sacrifice and compassion. They needed a different place, because they served a very different king. This week we American Christians honor the pilgrims for their faithfulness, and we can learn from their thankfulness. Let us give thanks to God for the way God gets us through the storms and struggles of our lives and our nation, and let us remember as a nation that we stand under the judgment of God, and as Christians each of us should to be faithful to the different king who loves us and suffered and sacrificed for us.

The early Christians were also a small group - smaller than we usually think. But what kept them going was faithfulness to their king - their different king.

They called themselves “followers.” We call them “disciples.” They would serve God as their Lord before they would yield allegiance to any other - including the Lord of the realm, Caesar. They faced persecution and death. They worshiped in hiding and spread their faith as they fled. In life and in death, Christ was King.

They remembered Pilate’s question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate saw Jesus as another possible David, and another threat. He could only see kings through the eyes of power and might, gold and land. He was confused because Jesus had none of these, and said his kingdom was “not of this world.” In that week, on that Friday, the followers did not understand either. But later they understood. He wore a king’s crown on a cross; he was a very different king. And he won a very different victory and announced a reign that would never end from an empty tomb. They all gave thanks, and were thankful.

What kind of king was Christ to these followers? What makes Jesus so very different? Christ was the king of forgiveness and new life. In his love and forgiveness, they knew they could live differently. By his risen power, they knew this different life was not some fantasy. It was a reality within them and could be shared with everyone around them. They saw everyone as someone Jesus forgave, and they would gather in worship and sit at table with anyone who wanted to know about the king and wanted to live a new life.

What do we learn from pilgrims and followers? Faithfulness and forgiveness. They go together to bring new life. Without forgiveness, we are doomed to the old life. With faithfulness, we learn the joy of the new life.

Jesus is a very different king, and he does whatever it takes to give us forgiveness for our past and give us new ways of living that bring joy and peace that we can share with others around us. All we have to do is live that life, and trust the king.

I've preached on Christ the King Sunday for nearly 25 years now, and somewhere along the way it dawned on me that we don't really know what a king is. All this talk of kings is harder to understand once we think about it. Kings are a foreign idea for us. We think kings are a bad idea. We think that freedom means what it meant to the "adventurers" who came with the pilgrims. Ask most people on the street - or even some bright students in a religious ethics class at Trinity University where I was a visiting instructor, and they will say, "Freedom means I can do anything I want." We celebrate that kind of freedom and teach our children they "can be anything they want." Sometimes at Thanksgiving, we give thanks that we live in a country where "we can be anything we want."

Do you remember when we had all that talk about how bad the "me" generation was? Are you one of those children of the 70's and 80's and now 90's who think they can do whatever they wanted? I wonder where they got the idea? You would think that someone sometime told them they were rulers of their own lives. They were kings and queens. I wonder who told them? Parents? Schools? A culture most anywhere they turned?

What if we Presbyterians told our children that they could do whatever Jesus wanted them to do? How would that their ideas of freedom and priorities? What if we told ourselves that we could do anything so long as we could imagine Christ doing it? What if we got honest with ourselves about who really rules our lives and admitted that we are little kings and queens. Every generation is some kind of "me generation," and we all want what we want? Think what might happen when a band of people united together to ask what Christ wanted them to do? What if we really decided that on Christ the King Sunday we would vow to work at making Christ the king of our own lives, that we would become followers like those first followers and pilgrims like the spiritual ancestors we celebrate at Plymouth were?

You know what might happen? We would not have to flee to a wilderness or face stormy seas. I'm guessing that we would not have near as much hardship or suffering as they did, but we would have just as much genuine thanksgiving and joyful hearts. It would be a different kind of joy, a deep and unending sense of rightness about life and a trust that a God powerful enough to raise the dead can take care of the whole world and get us through it.

What if we celebrated that King? We could live that different life and share that deeper joy in our homes and on the streets right where we live the different life. We could become a colony of followers with Christ as king, a church of pilgrims with Jesus Christ as Lord - a kind of very different army with Christ as the commander.

It was a small village in remote England, and the boys school and the girls school were at opposite ends of the main street. Each year, one would parade down the street to the other for a worship service of thanksgiving and celebration. It was the boy's turn, so the school chaplain wrote a little marching song. Imagine the people on the sidewalks and the shop owners coming out to hear the children's voices singing in the street:

Onward then, ye people; join our happy throng.
Blend with ours your voices, in the triumph song.
Glory, laud, and honor Unto Christ the King.
This through countless ages, men and angels sing.

Though countless ages, Christ is still the king. Let's give thanks to God for the pilgrims and the first followers, and live in the forgiveness and faithfulness of the very different King.

Prayers of the People

Give thanks to your Lord, that he is a Savior. Give thanks for forgiveness.

Give thanks that God can overcome the past of our mistakes, our stupidities, our sins, individually and in communities like churches and even nations.

Give thanks that Christ does not wait until we are loyal to bless us. Give thanks for all the blessings Christ has given to you, especially the ones that are spiritual more than material.

Give thanks to God for this nation, and pray that we will be faithful to the blessings we have been given.

Give thanks to pilgrims who are faithful, who try to do what Christ would do.

Give thanks that you are blessed with a bounty - a full table and a frig for leftovers.

Pray for people who face hardship like the pilgrims did.

Pray for the hungry - and ask what Christ wants you to do about them.

Pray for the sick - and ask how you could be Christ's strengtheners to them.

Pray for the grieving - and ask how you could comfort the way Christ comforts.

Pray that we Presbyterians, and we at Brenham Presbyterian, will remember who is king, and "give heart and mind, soul and strength" to serve him.

And pray to be more like your King by remembering the prayer of your King...