

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 21, 2021

Year B, Proper 29, Revised Common Lectionary

[Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14](#)

[Psalm 93](#)

[Revelation 1:4b-8](#)

[John 18:33-37](#)

“If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But my kingdom is not from this world.”

+ + +

I have a Russian icon I love dearly. It's followed me from high school through countless dorm rooms, apartments, and now houses. It's a mass-produced factory icon, not a painted one: it cost me about a dollar and a half at a street kiosk in Moscow. It's an image of Christ the Pantocrator—a Greek word that essentially means “Big boss of everything.” It's maybe the most common image of Jesus in Eastern Orthodoxy. He appears dressed in a way he surely never dressed in his earthly ministry: in bright red and blue robes against a dazzling background of gold, seated on a heavenly throne. It's seen in the apses and domes of countless churches around the world: the idealized representation of Christ as King.

Now we don't live in a world with a lot of kings in it anymore. At least not as many as there were in New Testament times, and the few today who actually go by the title of king or queen generally don't have the real power anymore. But we certainly still live in a world with power, and a world that longs for order, and a world where the lure of the one big powerful ruler is as strong as it ever was, even if those rulers today mostly have different titles like prime minister or president and cloak their kingship in some of the apparatus of parliaments and elections. Life is chaotic and dangerous and messy. Putting a single strong leader in charge is one way to try to manage that, and it has a lot of appeal. Of course the downside of that is the strong leader isn't accountable to anybody else. So throughout human history an awful lot has depended, for so many people, on what kind of king you have.

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost. And following a tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, this day is often called Christ the King Sunday. Which can be a very good thing or a very bad thing. We could take this day to mean that Jesus is King, in the sense that he's more powerful than all the other kings. He's the real Caesar, the big boss of everything in an unironic sense. And then we could take Jesus to bless all the hierarchies that we live with, especially those we ourselves benefit from. If we understand the kingship of Jesus that way, then celebrating Christ the King is a disaster. But there's another possibility, which is to say that if Jesus is the only real king, then every other kingship is bankrupt. To read Christ the Pantocrator as true, and also ironic, at the same time.

In our gospel reading Jesus stands before Pilate in a scene where the irony is so thick you can spread it on your pancakes. “Are you the King?” Pilate asks, and the whole question is laughable as this shackled prisoner stands before the representative of all the power of Rome, except that the author intends us to know what Pilate doesn’t, that the answer is yes. The outsider, the condemned criminal, is the ultimate authority. The kingship of Jesus undercuts our human systems of power, turning them upside down.

Jesus has an uneasy relationship with power. His vision of his ministry and God’s rule clearly challenges the ruling powers head-on. And yet Jesus is not a conventional revolutionary either. When he’s asked about paying taxes, he offhandedly says to “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” On the night of his arrest when his followers try to fight back, he tells them, “Put away your sword; all who take up the sword will die by the sword. Don’t you think I can call my Father to send twelve legions of angels?” Jesus has no interest in overthrowing empire by violent force. For Jesus, the human idea of power is a false god. Jesus is interested instead in the power of God, which is exemplified not in being in charge, not in controlling others. Instead it is exemplified in service, in mercy, and in compassion, even to the point of accepting unjust suffering out of love.

This is the mystery at the heart of the universe: that the ultimate source of and authority is on the side of those who have none. This is the secret that has given strength to Jesus’ followers to walk his way throughout the centuries, from St. Francis to Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day to Martin Luther King.

Of course that makes it all the more heartbreakingly ironic that over the centuries, the church has often fallen into the trap of colluding with Pilate. As we look back through history, we see the Crusades and the Inquisition. We see Christians using the texts of scripture to defend the indefensible: slavery, torture, the subjugation of women, even Nazism. Whenever Christians have succumbed to the temptation of using the coercive tools of human power, disaster has followed as the church has traded the kingship of Jesus for the kingship of Caesar.

Yet there have also always been those who called the church back to Jesus' understanding of kingship. During the dark years of the Third Reich, a few brave German Christians broke away from the racist National Reich Church to form the underground Confessing Church. Just as the earliest Christians had insisted that there was no emperor but Christ, figures like Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Niemoller insisted that there was no Führer but Christ. Barth went into exile, Niemoller was imprisoned, and Bonhoeffer died for his witness. These three Christians, and many others less well-known, held out the vision of the true kingship of Jesus in a desperate time.

That vision is never-ending. If Jesus is the real King, then Caesar is not. Then all the despots and authoritarians of this world are merely cardboard cutouts, representing a twisted reality on which God has already passed judgment. The fact that God's righteous one was executed as a political criminal shows us once and for all how bankrupt the human system of domination really is. And the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead is God's promise that this domination is not the final word.

In my Russian Pantocrator icon, Jesus has an open Bible in his hand. The verse the Bible is opened to is from Jesus' speech to his disciples, only a few chapters earlier in this same Gospel of John: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."¹ This is the kind of king we have: one who reigns over us by commanding us to love each other—the one thing that can never be coerced. It's an upside-down sort of commandment, from an upside-down sort of king.

May God give us the grace to obey that commandment of love as we live together in anticipation of the day when all things will be brought under Christ's most gracious rule.

¹ John 13:34.