

John 19:1-16

No kings

ForeWord

“*Jesus Christ*”

The expression “*Jesus Christ*” doesn’t make sense in the way that it once did.

I don’t mean by this that fewer people are familiar these days with Christian language and commitments than once was the case. I mean that the expression “*Jesus Christ*” once meant something which it no longer can – at least for us in the secularised modern West.

To most of us most of the time, *Jesus Christ* is the name of a person. It is, however, properly the contraction of a short sentence: *Jesus is the Christ*. It is the meaning of this that is problematic. This is because we don’t really know anymore what a Christ is, apart from the biblical story, within which its meaning was clear to most of the original actors. And because that meaning was clear, it was also clear that the expression “*Jesus Christ*” sets two incompatible things alongside each other: the *idea* of the kingly Christ, and the *history* of the crucified Jesus.

We can, of course, still understand this contradiction in a formal sense. But we no longer *feel* its meaning. This is not simply because we have shifted to a different kind of political system where kings don’t matter so much. It is because the connection between our political systems and our wider understanding of the world has changed.

Up to Jesus’ time, and for the next 1500 years or so, kings were not merely political figures, in our modern sense. They were participants in the cosmic order, and representatives of that order. The king was king on earth because God was King in heaven and earthly kings served as signs of that divine order. The world is as it is because God has ordered it so. The earthly king was the sign of that highest-to-lowest integration.

Kings no more

But we don’t live in that world anymore – a world in which mundane things participate in and represent divine order. Our sense of the world and ourselves is self-contained. Kings can no longer represent divine order; they are just “there”, or not.

To speak of Jesus as the Christ, then, is not to say anything very significant within this worldview. It will necessarily be sentimental, with an air of nostalgia. It is certainly not an expression that could move the modern heart, because we don’t feel the contrast being drawn in any moving way. If the contrast would once have been understood and the cause of either rejection or wonder, in the modern world, it’s just one more thing we can take or leave. Kings and queens today are more like celebrities, with whom they share the cover of the kinds of magazines you can pick up at the supermarket checkout. Once the world was disconnected from heaven, kings and queens were destined to become social media influencers.

What, then, might it mean to confess Jesus as king, as reigning, today?

For some orientation around this, we pause to hear again from the Gospel according to St John – today from the appearance of Jesus before Pilate. There are two kingships at

play in the story. One involves a real king in the older integrated sense -- the Roman Emperor, the fear of whom is part of what sways Pilate against Jesus. The other – I think – less real kingship, in the normal sense of “real”, is Jesus, who has previously said that his kingdom is “not from here (18.36) – not a kingship like the Emperor’s.

Listen for the two presentations Pilate makes of Jesus as he presents him to the howling crowd, and the language Pilate uses – the language *John the Evangelist* uses – to tell us something about the kind of thing Jesus is.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture: (John 19.1-16)

Word: Proclamation

Behold the human

Pilate presents Jesus twice to the crowds. The first time, Jesus has been scourged and is mockingly dressed as a king, with robe and crown of thorns in the merest semblance of a king. But here Pilate says not “Behold, your king” but “Behold, the man” or, given the Greek here, more likely, “Behold Man, Behold the human”. The reduced humanity of Jesus is contrasted with the imperial kingship Pilate represents.

And this is not a mere “Here he is” but here *you* are – all of you: behold the human. Know your place. This is how the “king of the Jews” fits into the big picture, or doesn’t.

The second presentation invokes kingship again: “Here is your king,” now dismissed by the crowds with “Only the Emperor is king.”

It’s easy to imagine that what is going on here is a kind of moral failure – that those to whom Jesus was sent reject him and have him executed by claiming allegiance to the Emperor. We are quite capable of such commitments of convenience, of course, claiming some unpleasantness as necessary to rid ourselves of responsibility for it.

But morality is too narrow a framework for understanding what’s at stake here. Something deeper is at play. While the modern separation of earth from heaven – and so the loss of any justification of old-style kingship – is generally said to have begun somewhere in the vicinity of the Renaissance, in fact, it’s already underway here, in Pilate’s presentations of Jesus. Jesus has already told Pilate that his kingdom is not from this world.

But this does mean that Jesus’ kingdom is somehow “spiritual” rather than the worldly one of the Emperor. Jesus’ kingdom is not a somewhere-else, spiritual thing, in parallel with this one or still to come. The contrast Jesus draws is the contrast of the seemingly unnecessary, dispensable human – “Behold the human” – and the cosmic necessities of the Empire – “No king but Caesar, *therefore* crucify him”.

This is not easy, but it is important. In Pilate’s world, everything happens for a reason. He is the agent of Caesar, who represents (or even is) the divine order. If he says or does anything in Caesar’s name, it rests on the deep logic of the world – its integration with divine things. The king and what the king does represent God and what God wants done. This is how worldly kingship works: everything which happens is part of the divine order, the divine plan.

But John presents Jesus as something different. He only borrows the language of king, to crawl inside it and hollow it out for something else. Jesus is not an alternative monarch, as one might prefer Elizabeth II to Charles III. He is so different as to be unrecognisable as a king. Those who mock him are not, on their own terms, wrong. How *could* this captive peasant be in any sense “king”? Pilate and his soldiers know what a king should look like, because they have a particular idea of what the gods are like, whom the king represents or embodies on earth.

But John embraces this incongruence. We've [seen elsewhere](#) how the cross is (for John's Jesus), both the rejection of Jesus and his coronation. His not-kingliness is his kingliness. Something similar is happening here. True kingship is not being identified with something "spiritual" hovering around somewhere, but with the vulnerable and reduced Jesus.

To put it differently, if the old-style kings of the world represent the divine order, Jesus doesn't "represent" anything. He just is, not as the sign of some distant or deeper thing, but precisely what we see – a human being who, standing before the world's self-understanding, contradicts that world at its very heart. The question that matters is not whether Jesus is king. The only question is whether God is there too, in the un-kingly Jesus. With what, we might say today, does God "identify"?

In the end, John is not interested in kings, but notes only that kings are one of the ways we get ourselves and God wrong. To say that Jesus is king is to say that kings are not what we thought they were. The world – political or otherwise – does not "represent" God. Our problem with the kingship of Jesus these days is, then, not that our worldview has shifted, but that it took 1500 years for that worldview to begin to catch up with the gospel and, for the most part, we still aren't there, to the extent that we continue to try to establish this or that king, Jesus included.

And so we can easily elevate Jesus in the wrong way – as if he were an alternative representation of God. But there is a better, more gospel way of understanding the "kingship" of Jesus. He does not represent a divine ordering of things, and so is not constrained by that order, or his God similarly constrained. Jesus is "king" in that he knows that he still belongs to God, even as anything like order is crashing down around him. Jesus is "king" in that *God embraces him*.

"Behold, the human being", Pilate commands, and it is *God* who obeys: there he is, Jesus, one of my children, I see him, God thinks. And for *this* God, to see, to regard, is to own, is to create. Jesus is not king because he is a particular part of a divinely ordered cosmic machine, but is king because he is seen and has a place in the heart of God. Pilate has been put in place *in order* to do particular things; Pilate is constrained. Jesus is not, has no particular thing to do but to be the Child of God. Pilate's truth – [as we saw last week](#) – limits him; the truth of Jesus sets free.

This is the difference, the not-of-this-worldness of Jesus' "kingdom". The kingdom of Jesus is a kingdom with no kings, an ordering not on the model of a machine but springing from the gaze, the embrace, of God.

Monarchs, all

And, as it is for the human being Jesus, so it is for the human being that each of us is, here and now. The human, pastoral significance of the kingship of Jesus is not that he is our boss, rather than some monarch, president or other despot – and a "nicer" king at that. To be "in Christ" is to be ourselves kings and queens (or whatever), and this because God sees us "in Christ", as God sees Jesus.

We are not required to "be" anything – certainly not to represent something about the divine order. We are to be ourselves. Our life is possible because God hears and obeys the command: Behold, the man ... the woman ... the child ... the beggar ... the billionaire ... the young one ... the sad one ... the sick one ... the near-dead one. God obeys, sees, and claims them – us – as God's very own.

There is no divine order to which the world conforms, through kings or any other means. There are, rather, as many divine orders – or re-orderings – as there are those of us whom God sees and re-creates between blinks.

For Jesus to be “king” is for all things to be elevated under the gaze of God. To confess that Jesus is king is to commit ourselves to live without fear of circumstance, but to let our circumstance be the form in which we will encounter God, be embraced by God, become our true selves. Let us, then, with Christ rise and reign into life, living towards demonstrating a world which has no need of kings or queens because, with this God, it all matters, it is all seen and valued.

Behold the human being, God says. See yourself, as I see you.
