

The Virtues of the Shepherd King

Readings

Jeremiah 23.1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1.15-20

Luke 23.35-43

Opening

I avoided him as long as I could and so had most of my friends. In the Howard College of Arts and Humanities at my undergraduate university, the name “Murphy” (not his real name) was a name to be avoided. Word had spread that he was demanding, he thought too highly of himself, and worst of all, he transgressed the unmentionable sin of being the toughest grader on campus. Murphy did not fit our idea of what a college professor *ought* to be: interesting, entertaining, cool, humorous, and most importantly, an easy grader.

When registration time comes, sometimes the course or the professor chooses you. I look for courses offered by student favorites and I see FULL written in red letters down the screen. I need some 300 level courses for graduation and there’s only one course title that interests me as a history major. History of the Old South, seats available. Well, that sounds interesting. Eyes scan further right. Instructor: Murphy. Oh dear.

I have no choice. I enroll in the academic wilderness of Murphy’s Old South course.

It took me no more than three lectures to discover that my friends didn’t have any idea what they were talking about. I moved from dread to a bit of awe. Here was a teacher who really embodied the noblest virtues evoked in the title “Professor.” Well, he did think too highly of himself, but he also clearly loved his students.

He was well-learned, ready for every class session. He was energized by the classroom discussion with his students. He was demanding, but demanding in a way that lifted us to a higher plane of learning, speaking, and writing than we thought ourselves capable. He was always fair and charitable in grading. He commanded fifty minutes of instruction and discussion better than any teacher I've had. I thought I knew what a Professor ought to be, but I learned in Murphy's course I had been blind to the Professor I needed.

An Ancient Temptation, A Demand for a King

Each year we celebrate Christ the King Sunday on the final Sunday of the church year. This Sunday gives us space to meditate on the kind of king Jesus is. We have all kinds of pictures, ideas, and expectations of royalty and kingship. But do our images of kingship align with King Jesus? Whatever ideas we have about kingship, whether conscious or subconscious, have those ideas been shaped by the Bible or elsewhere?

As we meditate on the kingship of Jesus Christ, let's remember the origins of kingship in Israel. Remember Israel's demand of Samuel in 1 Kings 8. As Israel grew from a federation of tribes into a settled nation, she didn't want to be ruled by judges like Samuel anymore. Israel demanded a human king. The elders of Israel gathered around Samuel at Ramah and said, "You're old and your sons aren't fit to judge us. Appoint a king for us *like all the nations.*"

The demand was a moral disaster, even before it went pear-shaped with Israel's first king, Saul. The demand itself was a disaster before a king was anointed. Israel was not chosen to be *like all the nations*, she was elected to be a *light to the nations*, a kingdom of priests who worshipped the one true God. The God who made the heavens and the earth would be their king. When Samuel came into the Lord's presence with Israel's demand, the Lord said, "They have not rejected you, Samuel. They have rejected me." Israel demanded a king according to *their* image and *their* likeness. But their king was the invisible God who made heaven and earth.

This is not just a piece of biblical history. Here is spiritual truth for each generation. 1 Kings 8 reads like a warning. You will be tempted to demand a king in your image and likeness. The heart turned inward on itself; the soul contending with trials and evil in this world; the

body seeking its own pleasures; sooner or later we will be tempted to say, “I want you to be the king I want.”

Our Anglican tradition calls us to pray the Lord’s Prayer twice a day. It’s included in both Morning and Evening Prayer. If you’re building up a prayer discipline, praying the Lord’s Prayer in a patient, attentive manner, morning and evening, is a good beginning.

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer long enough, you will discover that place in your heart that wants to substitute a few pronouns. Instead of “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” you hear the deceitful heart utter, “My kingdom come, my will be done.” It makes one glad for the final intercession in the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Lead me not into the temptation to make you a king in my image and likeness. For you alone are Christ the King: Thine is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory.

Instead of *making* a king in our image, we confess and surrender to Jesus the King. Faithfulness to King Jesus means learning what kind of king he is, not as we expect him to be or perceive him to be.

For the remainder of my remarks this morning, I want to consider three virtues of Christ our King so that we worship our King as He is, not as we imagine or, God help us, demand him be. Jesus Christ is our suffering King, our wise King, and our Shepherd King.

A Suffering King

If there is any virtue of Jesus’ kingship that perplexes us, it is the virtue of Jesus revealing his kingly power through suffering. We may believe that idea intellectually, but affirming that belief when your body or soul is in the midst of pain is quite a different matter. Trusting Christ from the heart is more difficult than intellectual agreement.

But Christ the King embraced brokenness on the cross when his body and soul endured unthinkable suffering. In Luke’s Gospel reading, we hear the elders of Israel mocking Jesus, suggesting he save himself if he *really* is the King of the Jews. It is the ultimate sign of rejection. The elders of Israel gathered around Samuel and rejected God as their king; now

the elders of Israel gathered around the image of the invisible God, hanging on a cross, rejecting God more violently than before.

The Enemy of God tempted the Son of God in the wilderness, “If you are the Son of God, throw down yourself from the temple and the angels will save you.” Now the elders, Roman soldiers, and a crucified criminal all join a similar chorus, “If you are King of the Jews; if you are the Son of God, save yourself from the cross!” But he will not reject the cross. Our King reveals his greatest power by remaining on the cross.

For on the cross, our Lord Jesus Christ disarmed the powers and principalities of this present darkness, putting them to open shame. Our suffering, crucified Lord placed his entire trust that God exalts those who are humbled. We believe that at the name of Jesus, our crucified, risen, and ascended, every knee will bow and tongue confess that he is Lord of all.

The way of suffering embraced by King Jesus becomes the way we participate in our kingdom. King Jesus grants authority and honor to those who follow him in the way of the cross.

Saul was blinded by King Jesus on the Damascus Road and in his blinding he received sight. Perhaps that is the path we all must take in bending the knee to King Jesus. He must heal our blindness.

After Saul became Paul, there are not many occasions in the New Testament where Paul has King Jesus address him from heaven. Yet one of those times was after Paul prayed three times for a “thorn in the flesh” to be removed. Paul heard his King address him, “My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in your weakness.” Paul discovered the secret power of this King and his Kingdom lay in embracing weakness and suffering, not refusing it.

A Wise King

The Apostle Paul helps us see the second virtue of Christ the King—Jesus is our wise King. The virtue of our Lord’s wisdom cannot be separated from the power of his cross. For it was Paul who wrote, “in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it

pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

It is not unique to Jewish or Christian traditions to desire that our king be a person of wisdom. The Greek philosopher Plato wrote in his *Republic* that a “philosopher must become a king, or kings (become) a philosopher.” Philosopher—the lover of wisdom—joined with the office of king, who would rule his people. The Greeks certainly envisioned that a philosopher king would lead and order his people according to the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. But they could not imagine the summit of virtue hanging on a Roman cross.

We must turn to a more ancient prophet, Jeremiah, to find the wise King whom the Lord loves. Return with me on page (). “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch.” David, the least of Jesse’s sons. “He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Here is the king who will put the world back to rights. And this is the essence of wisdom: to order the world according to its original intent. When the world is ordered rightly, the poor are not trampled and oppressed, but all receive the kind and just care of the Lord. When the world is ordered rightly, people are not treated as things and things are not made into idols. The wise king executes justice and righteousness.

When we consider our wise king and Jeremiah’s prophecy, we must remember the preeminent wisdom passage from Proverbs 8. Solomon looks into the mystery of God’s Wisdom, a presence so powerful that Wisdom was personified in Proverbs 8. Wisdom cries out:

“The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,
before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.
When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man.

The Lord made his world by wisdom from the beginning. What Solomon perceived in his time, Paul perceived with greater clarity who this Wisdom is:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Our wise King, Creator of a world ordered in Wisdom, came to be our suffering King, to put his good world back to rights.

A Shepherd King

Next week we will begin to meditate and prepare for the first and second comings of Christ the King. But in both his comings he comes as the Shepherd king. Do not think a shepherd is all nurture and no force. In both his comings, our Shepherd King judges the evil shepherds who have harmed and wounded his people. Again, Jeremiah: "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries, (declares the Lord) where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord."

There is much rich goodness in these words. I make two Simple observations. When the Shepherd King comes, he gathers his scattered sheep, and "**they shall be fruitful and multiply.**" What does that remind you of? Eden. The coming of the Shepherd means not only new creation, but new flourishing, new fruitfulness and new joy for his people.

Secondly, in the presence of new joy, there shall be no more fear. Oh, we can't imagine it, that one day we will be total strangers to fear. We will not be dismayed, no downcast spirits. We will be whole, fully gathered in, none missing who have confessed him as Lord, Savior, and King. This is our Shepherd King, our suffering and risen King, our good and wise King. To him be glory and honor with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.