

Christ the King
Colossians 1:15-20
Christ the King Sunday
November 25, 2007

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created.” Colossians 1:15, The Message

There is a scene in the old Errol Flynn version of Robin Hood that I have always loved. You probably remember it. Robin and the men of Sherwood had just defeated the black-hearted Prince John, the sly Sir Guy, and all of their evil cohorts. As they celebrated their great victory as only true swashbucklers can do, a group of what appeared to be properly cowed monks entered the banquet hall, and their leader asked Robin who was to blame for the display they saw before them. Now everyone thinks that Robin will blame it all on the traitorous Prince John, but instead he said, “Richard!” If he had not gone off crusading in the Holy Land, he explained, then the king’s ethically challenged brother John would have never tried to usurp his royal power, and Robin would have never had to resort to almost getting himself killed to protect the kingdom and win the beautiful Maid Marian, the prototypical damsel in distress. Well, the monk who asked the question paused for a moment as if to think over Robin’s words, and then suddenly threw off his hooded habit. It was, of course, King Richard the Lionhearted himself, standing there in all of his regal glory, come back to England to claim his throne. And at that moment Robin’s rather insolent speech completely changed, and he and the rest of his merry men fell to their knees, while the Earl of Locksley reverently declared, “My liege.” The rest, as they say, is history.

Now there are a lot of reasons why I find that scene so memorable, but I only want to focus upon one this morning. What I find most fascinating is what happened when the true identity of that monk was finally revealed. It was at that point, you remember, that Robin Hood’s character and demeanor completely changed. Where just moments before he was awash in derring-do, he was now totally overcome with reverence and respect. Not only did he bow, but he also fell on his knees in an act of complete submission, ready to offer his very life to his king if needed. When the true

identity of Richard was revealed, you see, everything changed—which, if we are honest about it, was exactly how it should have been.

Today is not only the last Sunday of the Christian year, but the day we call Christ the King Sunday. The entire Christian calendar has been pointing to this day when we finally see the true identity of the one named Jesus. That identity will be a bit different from what we have become accustomed to seeing. For the past 364 days, you see, the Jesus we have observed has been very approachable. We have seen him, of course, as the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger. What in the world is more approachable than a baby? We have seen him as that precocious boy in the temple, amazing the scribes with his understanding of the faith. It is hard not to smile at that image, isn't it? We have looked upon him as that busy carpenter of Nazareth and as the wise and caring teacher of Galilee, both images that tend to draw us closer to him. And let us not forget that we have also seen him as the master storyteller, the compassionate healer of the sick, and the one who taught the truths of the kingdom of God by putting a child upon his knee. Those are all endearing images that have been immortalized in paint and stained glass. Then, of course, we saw him not only as the suffering servant, as the one who was bruised and beaten, but also as the risen one, the who had triumphed over the grave. Those are somewhat different images than the others, those that at first glance may not seem to draw us closer. But look again. Even there the one being crucified is the same one who, in the midst of his suffering, stopped to spend a tender moment with his mother and who took the time to tell a repentant thief that he would soon be in paradise with him. The one who broke the bonds of death is the same one who broke the bread with two disciples on the way to Emmaus and who cooked breakfast for the others along the shores of Galilee's sea. The Jesus we are so accustomed to seeing, the Jesus that the gospels present, is one that is very approachable, one that is very human, and one that in many ways is just like us. And in many ways, that is a very comforting image.

But how would we respond to him if that image changed? How would we respond to him if his true identity were revealed? How would we respond to him if, like King Richard, he threw off that outer garment and showed himself for who he really was?

What if we were able to see Jesus in all his glory and stand before the king? Apparently John the Revealer did. Even though it was just a vision, and even though he was probably only poetically affirming a theological truth, this particular revelation of Jesus is not approachable at all. Listen:

Then I saw the heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. He eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords."'¹

Well, that's no "gentle Jesus meek and mild," is it? It is difficult to see this one stopping to "consider the lilies of the field," isn't it? A bloody robe and a sword coming out of the mouth is not the image we want to hold so dearly in our hearts, is it? But even so, the question remains. How would you respond to that Jesus? How would you act if you stood before this ruler of the kings of the earth? Would you change your behavior like Robin Hood did when King Richard finally revealed himself? Would your speech be different? Would your actions change? Would you carry yourself in a different manner than you usually do? I'm just guessing, but I think that you probably would. Based on how Robin Hood reacted, I'm at least hoping that your reaction to one who may just be a little more important would be just a little bit different. But let's not forget that Robin didn't know it was the king *until after* the king revealed himself. Until that monk's habit was thrown off and his royal regalia revealed, Robin and his men had no idea that it was really King Richard. But it's different for us, isn't it? We already know who Jesus really is, don't we? He is not just Bethlehem's baby or Nazareth's carpenter, not just the "lily of the valley" or the one who "loves the little children of the world," but he is the King of

¹ Revelation 19:11-16

kings and Lord of lords, the very Word of God made flesh come to dwell among us. Our faith has proclaimed as much from the very beginning. So knowing what you already know, have you made Christ your king? Have you changed your behavior and knelt down before him?

Some will tell you that the reason that Christ the King Sunday has never really caught on in America is because the whole idea of royalty has become somewhat foreign to us. If you remember, we rejected the whole idea of monarchy way back in 1776. George Washington chose the title “Mr. President” rather than “Your Highness.” We had enough of the excesses of royalty. And today the exploits of Bonnie Prince Charles really have done nothing to help the cause. Americans, it has been said, do not respond well to kings (or even to queens, for that matter). Add to that the fact that we have totally domesticated Jesus. We have reduced him to nothing more than a pocket charm; as someone we keep under our control. Someone put our present conception of Jesus quite nicely when he wrote, “Chumminess is in, grandeur is out.” And while all of that may be true, I think that there is another reason for our rejection, perhaps a somewhat more damning explanation. More than likely, most Americans reject the idea of Jesus being king simply because they are too busy trying to make themselves into kings—if not of the universe, then at least of their little corner of the cosmos. Most Americans, and that includes you and me, want the world to fall at our feet. We want to be the master of our realm. And when that happens, the whole idea of King Jesus gets relegated to the backburner of our lives.

But that doesn’t change the fact that Jesus is King. Our little power play doesn’t change the fact that “*God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.*”² We are simply pretenders to the throne. So let me ask you again, now that you are aware of Jesus’ true identity, how are you going to act? What behavior of yours are you going to change? I hate to take this Robin Hood analogy too far, but I am reminded that all he really had to do was to change was his speech. He was already doing the king’s bidding, you see, by fighting against the injustice and oppression of Prince John (and no,

² Philippians 2:9

that does not mean that you get to go out and rob from the rich and give to the poor!). He was already looking out for his neighbor, already living his life as a servant, already defending those who could not defend themselves. If the same can be said of you, then I applaud you. If not, then let me ask you once again: what are you going to change? On this Christ the King Sunday Jesus stands before you in all of his regal glory. How now will you live?

Perhaps being a bit more specific might help to get you thinking. In Paul's description of Christ in his letter to the Colossians, he not only reminded us of who Christ was, but of what Christ did. Do you remember what that was? Let me help you by quoting that last sentence of that passage. "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*" Now while that may sound like heavy-duty theology—and it is—the point is fairly simply. Through Jesus, God reconciled the world. Through Jesus, God worked to put back together what men and women just like us had torn asunder. The dictionary defines the word "reconcile" as follows: "to restore to friendship or harmony." That is what Jesus did. So let me ask you this question: is that what you do. Are you doing the work of the King? Are you about the business of reconciliation? It doesn't take a Rhodes scholar to figure out that our world is broken. It doesn't take a prophet or a priest to understand that people are broken. It doesn't take a counselor or psychiatrist to know that relationships are broken. Jesus, the name that is above all names, the very image of the invisible God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, has always been about the business of healing the brokenness that fills our planet. Someone wrote, "If reconciliation is at the center of God's purposes, then the pursuit of peace and acts of reconciliation by Christians serve those purposes."³ As people who now know who Jesus is, as supposedly a loyal subject of the King, are you serving those purposes? What have you done to "restore friendship and harmony" in your family, in your church, in your community, and in your world? Are you about the business of your King?

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians," The New Interpreter's Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000, p. 610

Robert and Y.Z. are friends of mine. Both live in a small town in the Deep South. Robert is white. Y.Z. is black. After an incident in the local high school that caused a lot of tension between the races, both Robert and Y.Z. were troubled. They realized that the only time that the blacks and whites of that particular community were ever talking to one another was when there was a problem. And when that talking occurred, it was usually not the type that was very pleasant. Both Robert and Y.Z., each independently of the other, realized that that was totally unacceptable—both to them and to God. Through a series of incidents that I believe can only be described as “God-inspired,” Robert and Y.Z. were able to get together and share their concerns. As a result, the “Friendship Breakfast” was born. Twice a month a group of about 30 men would gather down at the local diner. They would sit together, at first on opposite sides of the table, and share the morning meal. At first the conversation was polite, as both sides were very wary of one another. There was all that history, you see. But as time progressed, things began to change. It is hard to criticize the other, you see, when you have a little dab of jelly on your chin or when you spill coffee on your tie. Those who gathered at those breakfasts got to know one another, first as black and white residents of the same small town, then as fellow citizens of the same community, then as brothers in Christ Jesus their King. Oh, that is not to say that there was or is no more tension in that community. Problems still arise. But now, instead of working through those problems as adversaries, they are able to work through them as friends. Robert and Y.Z. enabled reconciliation to occur. And by doing so, they were being loyal subjects of their king.

Now I do not tell you that story so that you will go out and try to reconcile the races, although if that’s what you feel God is calling you to do, have at it. I am simply using that as an illustration of the change in behavior that must happen when you finally come to know Jesus’ true identity. I simply use it as an example of what it means to call Jesus your king. A loyal subject of the king concerns him or herself with the work of the king. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” remember? Those who know who Jesus really is speak to one another, work with one another, offer forgiveness when forgiveness is due, love when one’s first reaction is not to love, and try to look at each other through

the same eyes that Christ looks at you. Is it difficult? There is no question. Is it necessary? Absolutely. Is there another option? No. If we are going to be subjects of the king, then we are going to have to be about the work of the king. And if we are, then nothing will ever be the same again.

Robin Hood did not know that he was standing in the presence of his king until Richard threw off his disguise. We don't have that luxury. We already know that we are standing in the presence of the king. The only choice we have is how we are going to respond. At the end of this Christian year, and as we are about to start all over by anticipating the birth of the true King of Israel, that is the choice that will forever be before us.