

The Once and Future King  
Sermon on Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-37 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
November 26, 2006

To the extent that I ever read great literature, it is probably due to the high school summer reading list. You wanted to enjoy the summer goofing off, going to the mall, watching TV and hanging out with your friends. The last thing you wanted to do on summer vacation was read a book, especially a book on which you knew there would be a test.

For our sophomore year we read *The Once and Future King* in order to explore the ideal political regime and the question of how to govern chaos-prone human beings. *The Once and Future King* is T. H. White's retelling of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. It tells the story of how young Arthur, who has learned what it means to be a good king from the lessons of Merlyn, sets out to create the perfect kingdom, called Camelot. Arthur's most important lesson is to challenge the notion that "might makes right." The idealistic king sets out to curb humanity's innate tendencies to violence and cruelty first by fighting the power of the nobles with his own power. When that project fails, Arthur attempts to channel power toward achieving lofty human aims, hence his reinvention of chivalry and the formation of the Round Table. While this works for a time, human envy and desire for glory lead to further problems, which Arthur tries to solve by aiming human power toward the achievement of God through the quest for the Holy Grail. The quest for the Grail only shows up further human imperfections, so Arthur institutes civil law to punish wrongdoers. The book ends with Arthur preparing to face his own son on a field of battle, his kingdom in shambles, his project to eradicate violence a failure. The noble experiment to create the perfect human society had gone terribly awry, but lives continually in the imagination of the hearts of free peoples everywhere. On his gravestone is written this inscription: "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king."

In a sense, Arthur's dream of a kingdom in which there is peace, justice, truth, and fairness is the goal of every human society, the aim of every good government. The question is how do we realize such a government? Western political philosophy has long recognized that the character of government depends on the character of those who govern. James Madison, for example, asked, "If a man is not fit to govern himself, how can he be fit to govern someone else?" The Declaration of Independence asserts, "A Prince whose character is ... marked by every act which may define a Tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people." If, as a people, we are ever to live in peace; if we are ever to live with justice; if we are ever to live with truth and fairness, then the one who governs us must himself be peaceful and just, truthful and fair.

Ought we then to search the annals of history for another Arthur, the once and future king? Or has that king already been revealed to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the man crucified as king of the Jews who now is ruler of the kings of the earth?

Perhaps it strikes you as strange that I would be urging you to consider searching for a king. After all, as a country we worked quite hard to get rid of one king and we have successfully resisted the attempts of many others. The closest we want to come to kings and queens is on our televisions and in the tabloids. We Americans are both suspicious of and fascinated by royalty. The Queen of England, for instance, gets to live in posh houses and drive fancy cars, but apart from opening kindergartens and unveiling plaques, we're not quite sure what it is she really does. She has all the trappings of wealth and power, but does she exercise any authority?

The danger of speaking of—indeed of celebrating—Christ the King is that we will view Jesus the way we tend to view the queen. As Mary Anderson wonders, "Do we view Christ as [some]one surrounded with the art and beauty of a tradition that is more antique than active? Do

we see this figure of salvation as hopelessly outdated and practically mute in these postmodern times?”<sup>1</sup> If, as is often said, the queen reigns but does not rule, is the same true of Christ? Is Jesus simply the titular figurehead of an organization, the Church, that is in fact self-governing?

Why is it that as freedom-loving, fiercely independent citizens of a democratic republic we ought to celebrate and submit ourselves to the reign of Christ the King? Clearly none of us voted for Jesus; I don't recall an election in which God ran as a candidate for Sovereign of the Universe. And that may be a good thing, since God may not have gotten our vote. God is instead the one “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:4b, 8). This title is a paraphrase of the divine name that God reveals to Moses on Mt. Sinai: I AM WHO I AM. I AM is a very curious name for God, but it insists on the central point: God is. God exists. Indeed God, the Alpha and the Omega, is “eternally existent, without beginning or end.” Moreover, God is free. God enjoys unlimited freedom. God is also sovereign over all time and creation and events and institutions. Thus God is the “One who by virtue of his eternal existence exercises sovereign control over the course of history.”<sup>2</sup>

We ought to celebrate and submit ourselves to the reign of Christ the King because he rules not as a tyrant, ruthlessly forcing his way upon us, but he rules with love and mercy. As our King, Jesus is “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). In his testimony before Pilate, Jesus claimed that he was sent into the world “to testify to the truth” (Jn. 18:37). Jesus entered the world to tell the truth about “eternal reality,” in particular “the true and eternal kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary W. Anderson, “Royal Treatment” in *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2003, found at [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_23\\_120/ai\\_111114179](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_23_120/ai_111114179).

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977) 68.

<sup>3</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955) 448.

It was Jesus' faithful witness to the truth of God that led directly to his death. His was a kingdom that the kings of this world do not understand. Jesus the faithful witness "was faithful to God even to the point of martyrdom."<sup>4</sup> Jesus the martyr—the word in Greek means 'witness'—is also Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. Christ our King is sovereign over the church by virtue of his resurrection from the dead.<sup>5</sup> And because Christ, "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20) has been raised, "everyone who belongs to the truth" (Jn. 18:37), everyone who belongs to Christ, will also be raised.

Jesus is not simply *the* faithful witness who laid down his life for God and God's work, who was raised by the power of God; he is also the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus triumphed over all the powers of the earth by the power of the resurrection. Now he is exalted at God's right hand where he rules over all the earth. Paul assures us that because Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross," therefore "God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:8-11). Christ rules because the ultimate victory is his. He has been vindicated by the resurrection. When God's kingdom comes in its fullness Jesus will be revealed as the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14, 19:16).

As his testimony before Pilate so dramatically demonstrates, Jesus is a different kind of king. First, his kingdom is not from this world, but from God who loved the world he created so much that he sent his only Son to the world to save it. Second, his understanding of kingship was vastly different from the world's understanding. As he said to his disciples, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Efird, *Revelation for Today: An Apocalyptic Approach* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) 47.

<sup>5</sup> Mounce, 70-71.

Benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves” (Lk. 22:25-26). Unlike “the kings of the Gentiles” who lord it over their people and consider themselves benefactors, Jesus the King came to serve his people. He “loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). The proof of his love is that he died on our behalf, freeing us from the sinful deeds and actions of our past. And “his generosity does not stop there. He not only liberated us from bondage, he has raised us to royalty”<sup>6</sup>: Jesus has “made us to be a kingdom, [and] priests serving his God and Father” (1:6).

To be certain, the Church is no utopia, no perfect society. But God has constituted his people a royal priesthood, sent, like Jesus, into the world to love and to serve. We are to be a sign to the world of the coming kingdom of God, a place and a time when there is peace and justice, truth and fairness, and plenty for all. We participate in and point to that kingdom as we submit ourselves and our lives to the reign of Jesus Christ, the once and future king.

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<sup>6</sup> Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina vol. 16 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 48.