

John 18:33-37 “Game of Thrones: Church Edition”

I have a confession to make. I’m a big fan of “Game of Thrones” on HBO. It’s been on for seven seasons, and I’ve been eagerly awaiting the eighth and final season. If you aren’t familiar with the show, it’s about seven kingdoms in a fictional realm called “Westeros.” The quick and easy explanation of the show is that these seven kingdoms are all competing to overthrow the capital city of Westeros and thus ruling the entire continent. Alliances are formed and broken, epic battles take place, people are constantly stabbing each other in the back (sometimes literally), each kingdom develops or harnesses what they believe is the ultimate, indefensible weapon of mass-destruction that will lay waste to their enemies. And of course, there are many human casualties because of these wars. People go hungry, are subdued into slavery and disease runs rampant. Kind of like real life except with dragons and magic. But some of the best science fiction and fantasy usually reflect what’s going on in the real world. But the main focus of the show is, “Who gets to be king or queen.” Will it be the one who’s the rightful heir to the throne but keeps getting distracted by her many side-quests? Is it the corrupt incumbent leader who gained the throne by treachery? Is it the noble young military elite who guards the kingdom against potential invaders from the North? Again, it’s like real life. The question is, “Who would be the best ruler of the realm? Who would be the most righteous king or queen despite their many flaws?”

In today’s world, we aren’t very fond of the word “king” to describe world leaders. Very few nations in the world outside of some nations like Saudi Arabia, Jordan or Tonga use the word “king” or “queen” as titles for their leaders. Even the Queen of England is more of a ceremonial title because the country is governed by a Prime Minister and a Parliament. In today’s world, “king” is often associated with an oppressive regime ... something polar opposite of the freedom we enjoy and value of people of *this* “realm.”

In our scripture reading from John, we get a picture of the soon-to-be crucified Jesus as one who might be considered a failure as far as kings go. The minute people started claiming that Jesus was the “King of the Jews,” he became a target for the powers that be. But there was no battle for power in this story. He was arrested, tortured and eventually crucified for answering the question Pilate posed to him – “So, you are a king?” And Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” When you consider what happened next, it looks like Jesus’ all-too-brief reign was an epic failure. And yet, here we are ... a church that claims a risen Christ. We have no problem signing “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun.” Every week we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done here on Earth as it is in heaven.” So what happened?

First off, let’s ask, “What does the reign of Christ look like?” Or maybe, “What *should* the reign of Christ look like?” Well, the kingship of Christ is not just a purely spiritual thing with no political implications. When we pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we’re making a pretty clear statement that we’re not happy with the way things are done on earth. We know that there’s a way that’s right ... a way that should be, but ... *isn’t*. When we pray this, we’re praying that the political systems and regimes which protect the messed-up earthly status quo will be *terminated* and *replaced* by *God’s* rule. You can’t get much more political than that. That’s why the Romans killed Jesus. They recognized that any movement that pledged allegiance to a power higher than Rome needed to be eradicated. Rome based its power on the principle of threat: Follow our rules or be wiped off the face of the earth. That’s how the Caesars did it. That’s how Alexander the Great did it. That’s how the Persian and Babylonian Kings did it. And it’s worked out pretty well thus far. Rebels had to either be stomped out or neutralized.

When the Romans took out a perceived threat like Jesus, they were making a point. It wasn’t just capital punishment. It was to stop the

movement in its tracks. So they nailed Jesus to a cross with a sign: “This is the King of the Jews.” The message was all too clear. If anyone else gets any ideas into their heads about being any kind of a king and leading the people to rise up against Rome, this is what you can expect. Here is a failed king. And any king who doesn’t take his orders from Rome will likewise be a failed king and be strung up like this one. In Rome’s mind, the sign was hung over Jesus’ head to ridicule and snuff out *any* notion that he might be a king. They were telling us in no uncertain terms that "King" was not the proper descriptive term for Jesus. And you know what? It isn’t.

Notice Jesus didn't employ the sort of infrastructure you'd see in a monarchy. He didn't maintain a palace or a royal staff. Any time his disciples wanted to set up camp permanently, he said, “No. That’s not why we’re here.” He didn't proclaim any boundaries or establish military forces to defend them. He didn't rule with an iron fist. The word "king" as it is understood in our world, is clearly the wrong word for Jesus. Yet we in the Church continue to use it. Why?

Because in *deliberately* using this “wrong” word, we create a powerful metaphor that reveals a more profound truth. First of all, when we say that Jesus is King, what we’re really saying is that for us, *no one else* is king. In saying that we belong to the Kingdom of Jesus, we are saying that we are not submissive citizens of *any other* kingdom. We're saying that Jesus and his agenda is what sets *our* agenda. We're not going to give unquestioning allegiance to any other authority. Mind you, we're not going to be hostile or seditious towards the countries we live in, but we sure as heck aren't going to cooperate with them when they ask us to compromise the values of love and justice and hospitality that we’re called to follow. Especially if it's to advance their own national interests and agendas. Our allegiance as Christians is to the King of Love whose kingdom is *not* defined by national boundaries.

Secondly, we're saying something about those who would call themselves “king” or “president” or “prime minister” or “supreme ruler”

here among us. By saying "Christ is King," we're saying something about what a ruler *should* be like. We're saying that no matter who sits in the Oval Office or 10 Downing Street in London, or Parliament Hill in Ottawa, or the Kremlin in Moscow that person will not be a true "King" worthy of the name and title until he or she is ready to take on a crown of thorns and be willing to die for *all* the people under his or her land. And being the Body of Christ, we need to hold our rulers accountable to fulfilling their role as the kind of rulers the Old Testament prophets called for. Rulers who are as caring and protective as a shepherd. Rulers who lead wisely and who make sure justice and righteousness live in the land. How many rulers or politicians do you know who've been compared to a shepherd?

See, the true King is one who experiences first-hand the suffering of his people. The *true* King is "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." The *true* King doesn't sit in a palace and issue decrees or executive orders. A *true* king journeys *with* the people. If there is a wilderness to be passed through, he leads the way. If there's an execution to be faced, he's hanging there among the executed. And if that sounds weird, read Luke's account of the crucifixion when a dying man recognized Jesus as a King because Jesus was hanging on a cross among criminals with *thorns* crowning his head.

And so we gather at this table of thanksgiving this morning as subjects of no king but Jesus and are reminded that his reign has been established by laying down his own life for the *world*. We gather as citizens of a kingdom that recognizes no boundaries of race or nationality or gender or wealth or social class. We gather as those who will laugh in the face of the petty claims of the world's power mongers, even those who try to invoke the name of Christ to justify their actions. Today we confirm our faith in the One whose kingdom and power and glory are revealed in the one who rules now and forever ... Amen.