

Nov. 21, 2021 CTK Sunday B
John 18:33-37
Following Jesus as King

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This designation happened years ago by the Franciscans—Followers of St. Francis of Assisi. I realize that most of us have never lived under an earthly king and had our lives impacted by an earthly king in any way, so it's a bit of a foreign concept to us. But this day is set aside for celebrating the ultimate kingship of Jesus in our lives. Celebrating the fact that we are a people who, like Jesus, choose to live in God's kingdom and none other.

Some of you Lutheran theologians may want to stop me right there and point out that I have told you before that we don't have a choice. It is God's choice that matters. We were dead in sins and dead people don't make choices. Yes! In matters of salvation that is absolutely true. But when it comes to whether or not we follow Jesus as king, our choice becomes every important.

We can choose to worship. We can choose to follow. An example: One of our verses this week was Jesus saying that most important commandment is loving God and the second most important is loving our neighbor. Am I doing that or am I choosing not to? Do I really want to follow Jesus in this and honor Him as my King by doing what He does and what He wants me to do or am I content not doing it. It's about choice.

I've been reading a book called *The Dream of God*, written by an African American teacher named Verna Dozier. She points out that being created in the image of God does not mean we are good, perfect, or programmed. The way we represent the image of God in this world is through our freedom. Unlike any of God's other creatures, we alone have been given the choice of whether to respond to God as God wants us to, or to go another way. As Dozier puts it, "The lover is always vulnerable to the beloved. The beloved may always say no."

The biblical witness, Dozier continues, is that we are those people who believe that God will never crush our freedom. The God of the biblical story will never participate in the human arrogance of having it our way and

claiming it is for the other's good. (*The Dream of God*, Boston: Cowley, 1991)

And so into God's good creation comes a creature who says no to God's dream of this free and holy world. Because, as the story goes, we all know all too well, that being created in God's image was not enough for us, and very soon we became those creatures who have found and still look for every possible way to misuse the freedom God gives us. We call this "The Fall." The first of many falls: the choice human beings make against the lordship and sovereignty of God.

Throughout history, our story tells us, God appointed various leaders to bring us back to a life lived with God. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

And in the wilderness for forty years with Moses, God's people rediscovered all the things God wants us to do to live into The Dream of God. They carefully wrote them down. And read them over and over to themselves and to their children. Most especially to their children.

Then Joshua the great military leader of God's people marched them into a new land, a place to be called home. And whenever a crisis arose, God would raise up new leaders, men and women known as "the judges," who would come on the scene, direct people back to The Dream of God, and then disappear from the landscape of history with no heirs to their leadership and power.

By the time of Samuel, the last of the judges, however, the people and tribes were more secure in their homeland and had time to look around at the other nations. And what they saw were Kings. And so they came to Samuel and said, "We want a king to govern us like all the nations." (I Samuel 8:5)

"Like all the nations." We do not want to be different. Samuel is upset at having to make such a request of God, and tries to talk the people out of this king idea, but is reassured when God says, "...they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."

Verna Dozier calls this "The Second Fall": the people reject the kingship of God and become like all the other nations, beginning with the likes of Saul, David, and Solomon. All because the people demanded the security of systems and dynasties.

Over time the whole enterprise breaks down. The problem with kings is that they are inevitably succeeded by other kings and emperors, who move in and take over. And with them come their gods.

It is in this period that a small number of people rediscover what it means to accept God as king and lord over all. It is the wilderness sojourn all over again. God raises up new leaders like Paul and Peter. And Paul had even been a part of the empire's attempt to squash the new movement of God's people. Yet Paul was still raised up as a new leader!

For several hundred years the emerging church of Christ was persecuted by the empire. Until the time of the Emperor Constantine. It is then, in the fourth century, that the world sees the people of God choose the kingdoms of this world instead of the kingdom of God. A time when, in the words of an overly optimistic Christian historian, "the Church subdued the state."

Perhaps it is the American historian Barbara Tuchman who gets it just right when in her book, *A Distant Mirror*, she says, "by Constantine's gift, Christianity was both officially established and fatally compromised." The Third Fall! For in that moment, God's great experiment to provide an alternative to living in the kingdoms of this world became the kingdom of this world. Constantine was not seeking the good will of Christians, but rather the good will of their God. The church was the new organizing principal for organizing a kingdom of this world. The Gospel of Good News for the poor now saw riches and pomp as signs of divine favor. Kings were established by the church. Kingdoms and then nation-states used the church to manufacture more subjects. The kingdom was no longer seen as "something to come"—the plan of God had been fulfilled.

So the journey from the temptation to be God, to deciding that the kingdoms of this world offer more than the kingdom of God, to proclaiming the kingdoms of this world as the kingdom of God is a journey that leaves us feeling that beyond the present political order all that Christians are to hope for is their own personal transference to the heavenly kingdom.

What a long journey that is from the scene depicted in today's Gospel that shows the one we call the King of Kings, who has just ridden into town on a donkey, standing before Pilate being forced to defend His kingship. With His rag-tag band of followers days before laying branches and scarves and

coats in the road to welcome Him, to proclaim Him as the One Who Knows and Shows how to live out God's dream.

He is the one who, when His own disciples want to gather up someone else's money and call for carry out food to feed the crowds says, "No, let's just share what is ours with everyone and see what happens." He is the one who, as soon as He stills the storm on the Sea of Galilee, as soon as they get to the other shore, says, "Hey, there is a seriously disturbed guy over there. Look, the town people have chained him up and left him in a cave he is so dangerous and delusional and so utterly unlike us. Let's go see him!"

He is the one who, when His own followers try to keep sick women and little ragamuffin children away from this important leader of theirs says, "No, let them come to me. Anyone who cannot welcome them cannot welcome my kingdom." There is that word again. Kingdom. His kingdom. Our King.

He does not look, act, or sound at all like the Emperor Constantine! He does not look at all like the power brokers of this world — be they prime ministers, presidents, sports heroes, or software manufacturers.

So the question for this Sunday of Christ the King might be: "If the man on the cross is our king, how should our church look? Like Him? Or like the kingdoms of this world?" The church is called to be the people of God. The church takes two forms, "the church gathered" and "the church scattered." We gather to break bread as a community, to hear our story, and to recommit ourselves to the dream of God. We scatter to live into that dream.

Ministry is participating in God's dream of a good creation, and Jesus is the King.

So, do we want to follow the man on the Cross as our king? Or are we content just to worship him, and postpone for a little longer the fulfillment of the dream of God? It all has to do with our making a choice. There are kings. And then there is The King. We are free to choose. While we take our time in deciding which we will choose, the Good News is that our terribly patient God still waits. Amen.