

November 26, 2023 Reign of Christ Sunday

Matthew 27:11–14, 27–37

“In the presence of royalty”

1. I’ve never been in the presence of royalty.
 - a. The whole idea of a Monarchy is at best a foreign concept if not just a historical point of reference for us here in the States.
 - b. And even those among us here in the congregation who happen to be British subjects, having had a Queen for decades and now a King may still not mean they’ve ever met one of the members of the Royal family.
 - c. Ok, so if not a king, then maybe you have met a President, or a Governor.
 - i. Maybe you’ve met an Oscar winning actor or a Super Bowl winning athlete.
 - ii. You maybe have met someone who has an important role in the community
 - iii. My guess is that you may have come away from the encounter
 1. with a glimmer of their personality (she was so approachable! Oh wow, he was kind of a jerk!),
 2. or a slow realization of the huge burden they carry because of their role or accomplishments (he was very humble! She seemed like just a regular person).
 - iv. That individual, just a person like you or me, carries with them a responsibility by virtue of their role.
 1. And that role may be seen differently by those of us regular people who meet them
 2. Some of us will be star-struck
 3. Some of us won’t be impressed by how many votes they got, or how many touchdowns passes they threw
 - v. From our perspective as TV and news spectators of their lives, if they happen to get in hot water, then cracks start to show on their external shell
 1. We’ll hear of feuds and intrigue.
 2. We’ll read of their fights in court.
 3. We’ll be disappointed as fans when they’re nothing like the movie characters they’ve portrayed.
 4. But there will be many, MANY who won’t make the news because when in hot water they remain fully themselves, human, imperfect, they remain consistent, rising above their crises, and just keep going.

2. Today is the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical year, and it is called Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday.
 - a. It is a symbolic opportunity to crown the year with a final tribute to Jesus, whom we acknowledge as the Head of the Church.
 - b. Because of that, it may surprise you, then, that our passage is from Good Friday, from the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.
 - i. Couldn't we have gotten a gospel passage where Jesus spoke of being the Son of God, or a Revelation passage where the Victorious Jesus would defeat once and for all the forces of evil in a final epic battle?
 - ii. Couldn't we have gotten a gospel passage of Jesus as a miracle worker or insightful teacher, or a prophetic passage of how he would be the Messiah, the chosen one from God to deliver God's people?
 - iii. Instead we get this portrait of a rather quiet Jesus. He listens. He seems so passive. He seems defeated.
 - iv. They question him and he gives almost no answer.
 - v. He gets brutally abused and demeaned, and he just takes it.
 1. And the indignities are physical (they stripped him, they beat him)
 2. and symbolic (they crucified him with a name tag that isn't meant to be honest, but it tries to mock him "The King of the Jews" which might as well say "This is the best you people got? Here hangs your hero, dying. Fall in line or you're next")
 - vi. And the guards who first abused him and forced him on this death march, now sit and watch, to see him die.
 - c. It was a gory display meant to debase Jesus. And that brutal political theater was deemed necessary by those in power because Jesus had gotten too big, too popular, too threatening.
 - i. A scholar tells us this effort was to destroy him and his reputation in the eyes of those who previously supported him.
 - ii. The victim is humiliated, recast and relabeled so they're now seen as deviants, as traitors. (Malina, p.159)
 - d. And we watch the scene and we wish maybe Jesus would at least put up a fight, or something!
 - i. Say something, Jesus! Do something!
 - ii. That's not just us: his disciples were confused, let down – why isn't he fighting! Why isn't he showing his POWER!
 - e. Only the power that Jesus had shown he had shown already.
 - i. He had anticipated that his challenge to the way things were was going to lead to this moment, and he proceeded regardless of the risk it meant to him.
 - ii. His power wasn't a military or oppressive kind of power.
 - iii. It wasn't a "might makes right" kind of muscle flexing.

- f. His power had been to break down barriers that kept people away from God and away from each other
 - i. His power had been to show compassion and bring healing
 - ii. His power had been to upend our knowledge of who God really is
 - iii. And his power was to make us recognize how we are all created in the image of God, and as fellow humans, we have a responsibility towards one another.
- g. Jesus showed restraint when he was tried by the Romans to highlight the staggering injustice of that paranoid Roman empire, an injustice that was felt in daily and deadly ways by everyone in the land.
 - i. Jesus had been showing himself as the benevolent ruler by the healing and teaching he had been doing all along.
 - ii. He had shown what the reign of God could be, what it should be, when we love God, neighbor, even our enemies, , when we stand up for one another.
 - iii. He embodied the Good News of God's love, and worked hard to help his followers see that they too could embody that Good News of God's love.
- h. I recently came across a story I had heard before. This retelling comes in a *Christian Century* article by Melissa Kuipers.
 - i. <<In [the book] *The Different Drum*, spiritual writer M. Scott Peck tells a fable of an old monastery that was facing imminent closure, as the five remaining monks were elderly and there were no signs of interest from younger generations. Distraught about the coming death of his community, the abbot seeks advice from a [dear friend and colleague, a] neighboring rabbi [Together they talk about the difficult times each of their communities are experiencing, and they talk and weep and pray together. The abbot asks if the rabbi has any advice to share, to which the rabbi] replies, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."
 - ii. The confused abbot returns home and shares this curious message with his fellow monks. They spend the next several months ruminating on this idea: Which of us could be the messiah? Is it him? Is it me? They begin to think differently about each other, about the qualities each one exhibits. As they do, they begin to treat each other, and each one himself with the respect they would give to the Messiah.
 - iii. In the following months and years, visitors [continue to come] to the monastery's grounds [as they had always done, to enjoy the peaceful environment, but now the visitors begin to] notice a change in the atmosphere. [They begin to sense something special emanating from the monastery and the monks themselves. Visitors bring friends, and they bring their friends to the monastery for a picnic, or to play or to pray. And

eventually] They begin to seek the counsel of the wise, elderly monks. [Before you know it] Young men begin to ask if they can join [them in their community], "thanks to the rabbi's gift." >> (Melissa Kuipers, *Christian Century*, December 2023, p. 66)

3. The Reign of Christ isn't based on power, but on vulnerability.
 - a. It's not based on being right, but on doing what's right.
 - b. It's not based on being wise, but on trusting God's wisdom.
 - c. And as the rabbi's gift story reminds us, it's about seeing God in one another.
 - i. Treating each other as the very image of God standing there before us.
 - ii. Treating each other as if God has chosen that person standing before us to be someone who will embody the Good News of God's love.
 - iii. And that's true of each of you. And of me.
 - iv. After all, Messiah means chosen, anointed, and God has chosen each of us to be here to share God's love.
 - v. That's what the Reign of Christ is about.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when you felt powerful, and one when you felt powerless.
2. On this Reign of Christ Sunday we actually get a passage from Good Friday (Matthew 27:11-15, 27-37) which presents Jesus being mocked as being King of the Jews. What is going on here? Why doesn't Jesus seem to fight back?
3. In a culture which seems to live by a "might makes right" mentality, what role do we Christians play to exercise influence in society using power in the way Jesus did?