

## **Knowing Christ**

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It always seems like once Thanksgiving is over, Christmas gets shot out of a cannon.

Even before most of us have carved the turkey, Santa is making his way down 5th Avenue bringing up the rear of the Thanksgiving Day Parade, officially inaugurating the season, at least as far as the retailers are concerned.

Of course, I saw some Christmas ads before Halloween this year. So who is to say...

With no disrespect to Santa though, this season is really about someone else.

It's about Jesus.

These coming weeks are all about preparing our hearts to receive the joyous news of Christmas Day, that Christ has been born, that God's love has become a person to walk among us.

It's about Jesus.

And this Christmas season is jam packed with so many different ways of referring to Jesus.

Wonderful counselor.

Shoot of Jesse. Mighty God. King of kings. Lord of Lords. Prince of Peace.

You might notice that the titles for Jesus this time of year tend toward the royal.

Prince. King. Lord. Why is that?

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Our story today comes from the very end of Jesus life. When he is standing before Pilate the Roman Governor over the region in the trial that will culminate in his execution on the cross.

Pilate asks him: “are you the king of the Jews”

What do you think of when you imagine a king?

A crown. Perhaps a goblet of wine and the throne?

You probably are also picturing someone with a lot of power. Who is in charge of a lot of people. Who has servants at his beck and call.

Someone who is in charge.

If you are picturing something like that, then you are imaging the same kind of King the Pilate is imagining. And that is what got Jesus into such big trouble.

Pilate thought that Jesus wanted to be a king like the emperor was. And that was a threat.

So it is those very royal titles that we sing about to celebrate Jesus' birth, that will lead him into the trouble that costs him his life.

It shouldn't come as a surprise.

Although we don't usually spend a lot of time focused on it during this season, the Christmas story in the Bible ends with King Herod trying to kill the newborn Jesus and Jesus, his mother, and his father flee to seek asylum in Egypt as refugees.

So from the very beginning, this king of kings was loathed by other kings.

This prince of peace was under attack by the princes of violence.

So Jesus life begins, and ends, with a ruler of substantial power, who is trying to kill him because people are calling him a king.

Christ the King.

And what is deeply ironic and profoundly tragic is that they were picturing the wrong kind of king.

They imagined Jesus overpowering them. Overthrowing them. Taking control.

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I have to tell you that for most of my life, I have been very uncomfortable with royal titles for Jesus. I grew up in a church that did not use them. We never used the word prince, or lord, or king. The reason was that our leaders felt that comparing Christ to kings and princes made Christ out to be something he wasn't; commanding, domineering, pompous.

The one exception was at Christmas time. We would take out the old hymnals, and sing the king of kings and lord of lords. The mighty God the everlasting father the prince of peace.

The newer Christmas music just isn't the same.

When I got to Seminary, I worked in the chapel and I was helping to plan a worship service with a mennonite student. He wanted to use the phrase Prince of Peace in our service.

I resisted. I explained to him my well reasoned opposition to these royal titles.

But he was insistent. And he said something that really got me thinking. He said: "you are making the same mistake everyone else made about Jesus. He is not that kind of king. That is the whole point of saying Prince of Peace. It is not to celebrate the violence of kings. It is to show a contrast. Christ is a different kind of king. One who governs with the goal of peace. One who leads with love. Who is empathetic. Slow to anger. A healer. A dreamer.

Pilate and Herod were afraid of a conquering king. We know, that is not the kind of king Christ is.

I found his logic largely persuasive. And, although the royal language still sticks in my throat a bit, it does not bother me the way it once did. So long as we understand that when we call Christ a king, we are not saying Christ is like the rulers of our world.

We are saying that he is a different kind of king entirely.

And, I don't know if you know, but today is a holiday called Christ the King Sunday. So, if there were ever a day to do it...

So what kind of king is Jesus? Who is this Prince of Peace who we are about to sing all about?

First Jesus is a ruler through invitation not coercion. We follow Jesus not because we are being forced to, but because we have been invited to. Jesus

did not bark orders from a throne, he told stories on a hillside. He called disciples to follow him and they came, compelled by his message and his holy presence.

Second, Jesus rules for others rather than for himself. In his lifetime, he did not Lord his status over anyone, but rather he became like a servant, stooping to wash his disciples feet. And he did not seek the highest status, but rather made his home among the lowly and the cast out. In death Christ offered his very life for our sake. And in rising he set us all free.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly Christ rules by love rather than fear.

Now this is the place where I think that the image of Christ as the King has been most misused by Christians. For too many of us, we grew up with the notion that God was an angry judge to be feared. That Christ was keeping a tally of our rights and wrongs on some sort of cosmic scorecard that would determine our eternal fate.



Too many of us were raised with a religious that was more interested in controlling our behavior than setting our hearts ablaze with awe and reverence.

If you were raised with that kind of theology. I am sorry. It is wrong.

The truth is that God's love, Christ's mercy, comes to us as unbidden as sunlight. It is Christ's nature to love us, to forgive us, to pour out grace abundantly and ceaselessly.

But that is an awful lot to try to explain to Pilate in that moment.

So Jesus says this: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

That is, this isn't about you Pilate. This isn't about your little kingdom, or your power, or your control. If we were fighting over your world, my followers would be in here fighting to keep me alive. I am up to something bigger. My power stands on an entirely different foundation. It is from God.

So when we put that all together.

A ruler whose followers come at invitation rather than coercion. A selfless leader who is only in it for others. And a king so loving and gracious that we have nothing to fear.

It doesn't really turn out looking like any king the world has ever known.

In fact, Christ comes out looking like something else entirely.

The power of calling Christ our King then, is to remind ourselves that each of us, by virtue of our baptisms, are the citizens of a realm that is radically different than the world around us. We are followers of a leader who bears little resemblance to the leaders of our world, past or present.

The power of calling Christ our king is to remember that true power, true authority, rests with the one who is love, who is selfless, who extends an invitation in genuine hope, but leaves the choice to us.

That is who is in charge. That is who we follow. That is who we honor. Who we revere.

And if you really want to understand the meaning and the power of Christmas.

Just take all that beauty. All that hope. All that promise.

Take that new world that is possible, and indeed is coming very soon.

Take that bottomless love.

Take all of it, and wrap it into an infant.

And lay him in the arms of penniless parents, on the outskirts of an empire.