

“Checkmate”  
John 18:33-37

Two psychiatrists met at a convention. One asked the other, "What was the most difficult case you ever had?" The second one answered, "A patient who lived in a fantasy world. He insisted that he had a rich uncle in South America who would soon die and leave him a fortune. Every day he waited for a letter from an attorney. I treated him with psychotherapy three times a week for eight years." The first asked with great interest, "Did you cure him?" The reply was, "Well, yes and no. Just as I was making progress, that silly letter came!"

Sometimes, it seems that our faith in God and our hopes for justice and peace in the world to be a big fantasy or just a collective dream because the harsh realities of our world are ever present before us. It often seems that with God our king, we are often in the checkmate position with the powers and principalities of this world. So, how can we proclaim that Christ is our king when we know that the number of poor and hungry people seems to be increasing and not decreasing? How can we proclaim Christ to be our king when honest hardworking people can't seem to be able to provide for the basic needs of their families? How can we proclaim Christ to be our king when we have so many corrupt leaders in our world? How can we celebrate today Christ the King Sunday when it seems that Christ's ways of life and love are not respected in so many ways?

As we look at our Bible story for today from John 18, we see the whole issue of Jesus' authority being questioned. Jesus is before Pilate being questioned after being accused of conspiracy against the Roman government. He was being accused of conspiring to become the king of the Jews. Jesus is in the interrogation room with Pilate. There is not enough evidence against him, only the accusation. But in those days, that was evidence enough. But this accusation did not seem to be very credible to Pilate. To Pilate, there is only one king of the Jews, King Herod. Jesus did not seem to be a credible threat. He had no army and was part of the peasant class. But doing his job, Pilate asks Jesus and gets an answer that is often misinterpreted. Jesus says, "My kingdom is not made up of this world." If we don't understand the historical background of the story, we are tempted to think that Jesus was saying, "My kingdom is in heaven and is not an earthly kingdom." This kind of answer can help us a lot in dealing with our questions about how Jesus is king with all the corruption that exists in the world. What Jesus was truly saying to Pilate is that his kingdom was different from the established kingdoms of the world. In the Gospel of John the word "world" is used to refer to the Judean/Roman political, economic systems. So, what Jesus was actually saying is that, "My kingdom is not made up of the values, structures and people of Rome's political, economic and religious systems which are designed to oppress, exploit and dominate people." So, Jesus is talking about a world that he was creating that is not based on the corrupt values of the Roman Empire.

This kind of understanding of the kingship of Jesus can make all the difference in our worldview and in our understanding of faith. Jesus is not just another king, who acts and rules in the same way we think and know. Jesus is not a king with power that can abuse and coerce. Jesus is king who brings the rule of God's love, peace, forgiveness and justice into the world. We cannot look up to Jesus and say because he is our king, we can justify the ways we achieve God's purposes in the world. And in this way, Jesus is more powerful than any other king or ruler in the world because his reign is in the human heart.

Thomas Merton once sent a picture to a friend with this inscription on it "The only known photograph of God." It showed the hills of Kentucky close to his monastery and the sky, but right

in the center of the picture a sky hook, the kind used in construction, dominating the scene. To Merton the hook was a symbol of God. God is driven by love to capture the human heart.

This is the work of our king. It is the work of love. This work is what keeps us as followers of Christ focused on the ways of God's love in the world. Theologian Frederick Buechner, writing in *Listening to Your Life*, says of the kingdom of God: "That it is not a place, of course, but a condition, insofar as here and there, and now and then, God's kingly will is being done in various odd ways among us even at this moment; the kingdom has come already. Insofar as all the odd ways we do his will at the moment at best half-baked and half-hearted, the kingdom is still a long way off."

Jesus refused to be a king in the way people expected and knew. The people of Israel for years were hoping and waiting for someone to come and be their real king, their leader who would liberate them from the oppression of foreign governments and empires. In the year 167 BCE there was an attempt to overthrow the Greek government who was ruling over Israel. This was by Judas Maccabeus. But that was short-lived. Only a few years later, the Romans came into the picture. So, the expectations of the people were for a political leader who would rule them. But Jesus knew that by being a king in a system of domination, he would only become part of the system.

This is such an important message for us today. As we profess our faith in Christ and our allegiance to him as our king, we have to keep in mind the model of leadership we have in Jesus. In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nowen notes that, "The leadership about which Jesus speaks is of a radically different kind from the leadership offered by the world. It is a servant leadership-to use Robert Greenleaf's term-in which the leader is a vulnerable servant who needs the people as much as they need him or her. . . a leadership which is not modeled on the power games of the world, but on the servant-leader, Jesus, who came to give his life for the salvation of many."

Unfortunately, faith can be manipulated by people to make the message of God's love be a message of oppression and hatred. There is a bumper sticker that says, "Jesus is coming soon, look busy." While this is a funny saying, it implies that we are afraid of God and of Jesus because Jesus is coming back to judge and annihilate those who do not conform to his rules. In his book, *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr writes, "The individual Christian is told to love unconditionally, but the God who commands this is depicted as having a very conditional and quite exclusive love himself or herself! The believer is told to love his enemies, but 'God' clearly does not; in fact, God punishes them for all eternity...Such a message will not save the world and surely will not produce many great or loving people...Under the message that most of us have heard, we end up being more loving than God, and then not taking God very seriously."

Examples of the manipulations of the image of God as king abound in our world. The shooting rampage at Fort Hood comes from a theology that says that God does not tolerate injustice and is always punishing those who disobey the will of God. Earlier this year, the shooting of a doctor in his own church in Wichita, Kansas who performed abortions is based on the same kind of understanding of God as someone who uses violence and power to solve problems in the world.

On this Sunday when we celebrate Christ as our king, we are invited to embrace the unconditional love of God. God as the hook in the sky who is working hard to capture every human heart so that we can learn to love as God loves, even in the face and in the midst of great pressure and evil.

With Christ as our king, we trust that all things are possible and that corruption and abuse don't have the final word. With Christ as our king, we can believe that ending hunger is within our reach, that ending violence is possible in the world and that ending exploitation and injustice is not out of the question. All of this is possible if we follow the way of love.

In 1934, a group of Christians in Germany came face to face with the challenge of asserting their faith in Christ against the evils of their government. They wrote a confession called The Barmen Declaration, which was a call to resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state. You can find the theological statement in your bulletin. Almost immediately after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, Protestant Christians faced pressure to "aryanize" the Church, expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry and adopt the Nazi "Führer Principle" as the organizing principle of church government. In general, the churches succumbed to these demands, and some even embraced them willingly. The pro-Nazi "German Christian" movement became a force in the church. They glorified Adolf Hitler as a "German prophet" and preached that racial consciousness was a source of revelation alongside the Bible. But some Christians in Germany—including Lutheran and Reformed, liberal and neo-orthodox—opposed the encroachment of Nazi ideology on the Church's proclamation. At Barmen, this emerging "Confessing Church" adopted a declaration drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth and Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, which expressly repudiated the claim that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation. Some of those who resisted the regime like the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Roman Catholic priest Bernhard Lichtenberg—were arrested and executed in concentration camps.

These courageous Christians knew that ultimately their allegiance to Christ was to lead them in the path of love and not hatred. May Christ be truly our king so that our hearts may always be captured by his love. Amen.