

"Regem habemus"

A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Good Friday, April 7, 2023

Please Read:

Colossians 1:11-15

John 18:33-38

About three centuries ago, Spaniards besieged a French town, St. Quentin. The city walls were in ruins; fever and famine plagued the people. Then the Spaniards shot over the walls a shower of arrows to which they had attached little slips of parchment promising that if the townspeople surrendered, their lives and property would be spared. The mayor of the town was a devout French Protestant. He responded by tying a piece of parchment to a javelin and hurled it back to the Spaniards. The parchment read: "Regem habemus"; "We have a king!"

Having a King is not as anachronistic as you might imagine. Today there are 43 sovereign states with a monarch as head of state; 13 in Asia and the Middle East, 12 in Europe, 9 in the Americas, 6 in Oceania, and 3 in Africa.¹ The Coronation ceremony for King Charles III will be on May 6th. Then the British will also be able to declare, "We have a King!"

It may strike you as odd, but today we remember the fact that as Christians "we have a king." But what does it mean? Didn't we Americans fight a revolutionary war to get rid of the monarchy? We will sing on Easter, "Crown him with many crowns", but just what do we mean when we declare, "Christ is King"?

Like the French townspeople, we live in a world that is besieged with much hardship and evil. Polish poet Czelaw Milosz described the 20th century as *cruel*. Not a lot has changed. We live in a cruel world. Already in the 21st century, we are back to the cold war with Russia and war with China isn't far off... With the uncertainty of the conflict in Ukraine, we live with the threat of a nuclear war.

Developing nations are barging into the arena of international politics and economics, grabbing for their piece of the pie. Political, moral, and ecological disasters pile up around us faster than the media can keep track. Commitments to a just, peace-bringing, salvation-making God is at an all-time low. Proclamations by Jesus that, "the kingdom of God is at hand" are drowned out by a daily roar that challenges the very *existence* of God, let alone claims of the *sovereignty* of God.

All of us, at some time or another, have wondered why there is so much suffering in our world, in our own lives; why bad things happen to good people, or why

¹ Referenced online April 7, 2023: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_current_monarchies

good things happen to bad people... We may find ourselves secretly asking the same question that Pilate was forced to ask Jesus, "Are you a king then?" And the perplexing answer that Jesus gives is for all of us to ponder. Are we willing to stand and face the truth in our lives and in our world? Are we willing to ask, "What is truth?" and stand before God's deafening *silence*? It could be said that these are the times that try our souls. And precisely in such times, we need to know what we mean when we claim *Christ is King*. May I suggest that he is our Creator King, our Redeemer King, and our Sustainer King...

Jesus is first of all our **Creator King**. In our Colossians text Paul says, "All things were created through him and for him." In the prologue of the gospel according to John we read the same thing, "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." I find it fascinating that some of the greatest scientists of our day, in fact the founder of genetic mapping Francis Collins, is a devout Christian. We are compelled to learn more about and care for our creation because it reflects the genius of our Creator.

And if Christ the King created us, you could say that we are children of the King. In Genesis we read that we are created in the image of God! Sadly, we don't always reflect our heritage. We were created good, but we become alienated and estranged from God, even enemies of God because of sin. Slaves of sin, we cannot help ourselves. So many people live lives of pain and despair because of the effects of sin. We live in deceit and lies of many years. But the truth of the Gospel is that God in Christ is sovereign and has declared us forgiven and beloved.

During the evil days of slavery, a visitor watched a group of slaves shuffling off to work, bent in weariness and despair. But one man stood tall, held his head erect, and walked with pride. "Who's that?" asked the visitor. "Oh, he's the son of an African King," was the reply. "He never forgets that." Remember who you are in Christ - a child of the King, a person of worth.

Secondly, Jesus is our **Redeemer-King**. He is the king who wore a crown of thorns and who died on the cross to save his people from separation from God. Paul teaches that Christ reconciled the world to God by "making peace by the blood of his cross." It's the great exchange of all time: Jesus receives our guilt. We receive Jesus' righteousness. When Emperor Hirohito died in 1989, Japan pardoned thirty-thousand people guilty of thousands of offenses. If the death of a human-king could bring pardon, think what the death of Christ the King meant: This is the "good" of Good Friday: Divine forgiveness is offered to you and me, to all who will receive it by grace through faith.

That is Good News! God came in Jesus to do for humanity what we could not do for ourselves. God in Jesus gave God-self on the cross for the sins of the world. By that supreme sacrifice God reconciled the world to God-self.

Finally, Jesus is our **Sustainer-King**. In our Colossian text Paul says God "delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (NRSV). Jesus is the king of his kingdom to which we belong. We know that he is not like that ancient Egyptian king Rameses whose arrogant motto was inscribed on temples still standing, "I am the greatest." Nor was Jesus the same kind of king as the Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang who ordered slaves to build the great wall of China. Nor was he like Louis XIV, who lived in excessive luxury in his Versailles palace of a thousand rooms. Jesus was a different kind of king...

Jesus was a humble King, and preferred to spend his time and share community with the least of these. Everyone is welcome by the Sustainer-King. He comes alongside us... He is Emmanuel, God with us! Paul in our text says Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" and that in Jesus dwelt "all the fullness of God." This is in line with what Jesus said about himself: "I and the Father are one...he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). His enemies demanded his death, "because he has made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7).

All other kings and great leaders have been mortal. Buddha died. Muhammad is dead. The late Japanese emperor, Hirohito, died of cancer at the age of 87. He claimed to be the 124th living god in a dynasty stretching back more than twenty-six centuries. Because he was considered a god, Japanese children were taught they would go blind if they looked at his face. The mention of his name was forbidden. Hirohito is now dead.

In contrast, we make the audacious claim that Christ our King lives. The point is this: we are not alone. We say that his Spirit dwells within us. We say this because we declare that Christ our Sustainer King has risen from the dead. It is crucial (no pun intended) we understand why we believe God rose *this* King from the dead.

Today we remember that Christ endured the cross and died an excruciating death. But on Easter he rose from the grave. If he had not, he would be like all other kings. The resurrection is the historical witness that Jesus is sovereign over life and death. Because of his victory over death, Christ lives and reigns. All other kings have died. Jesus is unique, we believe, because he alone lives.

That does not mean that we as Christians arrogantly claim to have the only truth. Not at all. I like Keith Ward's term of "expansivism." There is a singularly unique truth of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but we can expand and sometimes correct our own faith by insights from other traditions. There are many moral teachings in other religions that are praiseworthy and good. But the difference between Christ the King and other religious kings is the difference between the sun and the rays of the sun.

Hinduism teaches that bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganges River will wash away sin. Contrast this with "The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:17). The Ayatollah Khomeini, the "Supreme Leader of Iran," offered millions of dollars to anyone who would murder Salman Rushdie, the author of *Satanic Verses*, because he criticized Muhammad. Contrast this with Jesus' command, "Love your enemies." Jesus is the God-King who reveals that the ultimate power of the universe is *self-giving love*. He is the King who reveals the power of love, not the love of power. And in the end, love alone will sustain us!

So... Jesus is the Creator King, the Redeemer King and the Sustainer King... What can our response be? Mother Theresa picked up a woman on a Calcutta street who was in a terrible condition. She explained, "I did for her all that my love can do. I put her in bed and we prayed. And that's when I saw what our Lord's love can do. There came over her such a beautiful smile on her face. She felt the love of Christ, and she rested in peace. But before she died, she said two words only, "Thank you." Before the cross, the only thing we can say is, *Thank you God*.

Like the French Protestants, we can say to the world "Regem habemus." "We have a King." He is Christ the King with many crowns. But can you say that Christ is *your king*? He may be the king of the Church, but he is not your king until you crown him Lord in your life. That's the crown that will bring him to full glory of his love and peace in your life and in the world.

Today, my friends, may we crown Jesus King of our lives, that we might come to know, love and serve him... That would make today a very good "Good Friday."

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.