

Kings, Lords, and Vagabonds

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In a majestic land, far off across the oceans, sits a palace with many rooms. Among these rooms is a great court capable of holding hundreds of people within its walls. When you enter, the first thing you see is the floor made of masterfully carved and uniquely placed stones. As your eyes lift, you behold on either side of you, two rows of towering granite columns, each of them with an intricately detailed base and crown. They are standing there like great sentinels, flanking the wide center aisle while supporting the heavy ceiling over head. In the middle of the court the ceiling opens and gives way to an array of mosaics running the length of the room. They are a depiction of the stories and truths of the people who gather here.

Above the mosaics are a row of windows pouring sunlight onto the ancient handsomeness of the tile work. The ceiling then comes together in a culmination of woodwork that any master carpenter would be proud of. From the ceiling joists, elegant lamps are lowered back down into the center of the court and dangle just a few feet above your head. These repeat for the length of the court and are echoed down each aisle of the great columns.

You walk further into the court and see even more of the mosaics laid into the floor. These are carefully protected from the wear and tear of foot travel. And at the far end of the court you see an array of different decorations. There are ornaments made of gold and brass and silver and ivory. There are paintings of the honored souls who contributed so much to the peoples of this land. There is a plethora of places to stop and pay homage to the one who reigns in this land; to make your offering to the one who governs and watches over this people.

And at the center of the far end of this court is a place where you yourself may ever so humbly go before royalty and have an audience with the King. There you are able to

pay tribute to his glory, or beg of his forgiveness for whatever crime you may have committed. You can even ask for his ever-watchful protection as one of his own charges.

The image I just described is one you would expect in tales of lords and ladies, epic heroism and fair maidens in distress. You might remember similar images from your grammar school history books. You might have seen Queen Elizabeth or King Henry sitting on a regal seat of authority, and wrapped in the most radiant of royal attire. They would be surrounded by the palace guard and the high nobility of the land. We see images like these and we understand whose authority the people act on. They act on the Queen's, Kings, or Emperor's authority.

But something we don't often ask is how did these leaders earn the right to sit on their thrones in the first place? What did a queen or a king do to be raised above all others as the one who would govern the people and make all manner of decisions for the betterment of the country? In the early days of civilization, kings rose to power because they were strong warriors who successfully conquered a civilization or protected the people against a conqueror. Later, more kings arose when kingdoms became too large to be effectively ruled, and consequently broke off into smaller nation states with a leader of their own. Shortly after that, you could only be heir to the throne if you were lucky enough to come from the royal blood line. If you were a member of the right family then you had a divine right to rule.

Today in many places it is still the case that kings or queens come from the royal blood lines. Other rulers are placed by outside governments after the previous ruler has been removed from power. And then others are elected to power by the people they govern. Yet our perceptions of these leaders are formed by what we know about them. Our opinions of their motives come from what we have witnessed or heard of their action or inaction concerning the needs of their people. We hear how one ruler is a very devout and religious man, while at the same time many of his people are oppressed by a societal

structure which he refuses to change. Another leader may show great compassion and zeal for making sure her country is defended from any attackers, but refuses to recognize that her people need to be protected internally, not just externally.

Much like our history books and modern media, the Bible gives us image upon image of the one whom we, as Christians, call our King. Two of these images were read in this morning's gospel lessons. The image from Matthew is the image of a mighty king in all his splendor and glory as he conducts the business of the Kingdom of Heaven. The second image is not so imperial. In Luke, we are shown a common criminal being executed with other common criminals. There is nothing clean cut and impressive about it.

So why are we given such a wide variety of depictions of the King of kings? What do these images tell us about Jesus? What did Jesus do to earn the right to sit on the throne of all creation to begin with anyway? The first image is pretty straight forward. Jesus appears much like any other king. We can even decipher through the scriptures that Jesus was placed on the throne of all creation for some of the very same reasons our modern leaders are in power. First, through the lineages in the opening chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke we can see that Jesus is descended from the royal line of King David, the greatest king in the history of Israel. This takes care of needing to be from the right blood line. Second, there are occasions in the scripture where Jesus was in danger of being forcibly taken by the people he was teaching and being made king on the spot; not to mention the generations of devoted followers he has gathered all across the world. This takes care of needing to be elected by the people you govern. Third, Jesus was sent by God, the highest authority, to supplant the most oppressive forces in existence, the forces of sin and eternal death. This takes care of the need for a greater power to install a new leader.

Yet, when you think about it, this only answers part of the question. This tells us why Jesus has the right to sit on the throne of all creation, but something is missing. I

mean, yes, Jesus is the judge who will separate his followers from those who did not open their hearts to the love and compassion and mercy of God. At the same time though, it seems rather cold. Do we really want a king who only sits on a throne and judges whether or not we fed enough of the hungry or clothed enough of the naked?

This is why we need a variety of depictions of Jesus. While Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, this is not his only purpose in being King. Perhaps we need to rephrase the question. Let's try phrasing it this way... What makes Jesus worthy of being followed?

This is where the image of the cross comes into play. This image is much different from the first image of a mighty king enthroned. This is the image of pain and suffering. What king wants to have a portrait painted of them in this lowly state of being disgraced. Here is the King of all creation, the Son of God, the fully divine, fully human incarnation of the Almighty himself being put to death in such a reprehensible way. After all, Jesus is King; his execution should get some kind of honorable ceremony to it.

As a matter fact, if Jesus is who he says he is, then as King of everything he shouldn't have been put to death at all. He should have used his power as the Son of God and conquered death in a mighty blow that unquestionably demonstrates his authority. He should not be succumbing to the earthly rulers, spiritual or human. The earthly rulers should be succumbing to him.

Or is that just the point? I've been going on as though Jesus was a king like any other that we would think of. I've been talking as though Jesus reigns over a worldly nation. I've been speaking of Jesus as though his kingdom were something we could understand in human terms. But land is of little importance to Jesus. The political arena is not where Jesus makes his proclamations. The battlefield is not where Jesus claims his triumph. Instead, Jesus set out to open people's hearts and minds to both God and to each other. In doing this, Jesus creates a small glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth.

So now we have a new question. Just how far is Jesus willing to go to save and protect and provide for the needs of his people? Our salvation is so important to Jesus that he forgoes everything. Jesus knew that unless he acted, his people would be forever separated from God. Jesus knew that if he didn't act with all the power and kingly authority he had, all creation would be lost to eternal death. That is something that Jesus and God just could not allow to happen. As King, Jesus had to do something to save his people. As King, Jesus had to do something to set it right. So Jesus took on flesh knowing full well what it meant. He taught, he healed, he preached, he fed the hungry, he gave drink to the thirsty, he made the blind see, he made the dead come to life, he brought the excommunicated back into community, he made the broken spirit whole, and brought droves of people together in healing, binding, holy relationships.

Jesus removed himself so far from that glorious image of being King on the throne of Heaven because that's how far he was willing to go to save the lowest of the low. Jesus even goes where he doesn't want to go to do what he needs to do for his people. He leaves his kingship so far behind as to be turned away even by the mercy and compassion of God in those final hours, all because he believed that our lost souls were worth it. And even in this place of great pain and despair; even in this, the darkest hour of creation, after Jesus has been unfairly tried, unrelentingly beaten, unmercifully rejected by his very own people; even after being nailed to a cross and made to suffer, Jesus reaches out in a moment of great compassion and offers hope to one last soul. To a dying criminal on a cross next to his, whose simple wish was that he be mercifully remembered, Jesus offers assurance. And with the authority of a true king, pardons this man's crimes.

While Jesus' power and authority is displayed on the throne, his victory is at the cross. Here Jesus says, "Not even you Death can stop me from saving my people. I will free them from your grasp and they will have eternal life in me."

Paul writes to the Romans:

Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul states it clear as day. Jesus was willing to die to assure that his people will know the love, hope, and mercy that God offers to everyone. Then, as if that wasn't enough, Jesus is continually working on our behalf so that we can never be separated from God. And absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of Christ so that we are always in his sight and wrapped in the grace of salvation.

What it comes down to is this. Jesus is worthy of being followed not because he is King, but because of the type of king he is. Jesus is not a figure head who sits on a throne and looks pretty. Jesus is not a cruel and heartless judge who looks only at the tribute you have paid him. Jesus is not a leader more concerned with getting votes than he is about doing good. Jesus is not favoring the rich over the poor, or allowing the oppressed to go unnoticed. Jesus is not making decisions and signing orders to send people to war just because the people in his cabinet have an urge to flex their military muscle and show the world that the King still has the biggest guns.

Jesus has left that throne room in that far off land that I described earlier. Jesus left that throne room not long after he was born. The throne room I described was the sanctuary of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem built over and around the manger cave in which Jesus was born to a peasant woman and a carpenter.

I will tell you again, Jesus has left the great hall, the court, his place of honor, whatever you want to call it, and gone out into the midst of the people, into the local communities, into the cities and towns, into the third world countries, into creation as a whole to see what the needs of the people are and to feed those needs. Jesus is working in and through and with the people of his kingdom to bring healing and the hope of a

brighter future. Jesus is in the hospitals and nursing homes reaching out to care for the scared and lonely. Jesus is working to provide food and shelter for every hungry and thirsty soul and cold body. Jesus is in the prisons working with the captives and the criminals toward redemption. Jesus is in the home of the widow and widower sitting and comforting the pain that just doesn't seem like it's ever going to end. Jesus is in our hearts working a wonder there that is just waiting to explode in all its glory if only we will trust in him. Jesus is out in the streets shouting out the good news that creation has been longing to hear since the very first dawn. "Come to me and I will make you whole again."

So now I ask you this... Is Jesus worthy to be your king?