

2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalm 145:10-18
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

Sermon for July 28, 2024

THE SECOND COMING

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: If I do not wash you, you have no part of Me.

Kings are nowhere near so common as they used to be. Through most of human history, kings and queens – or their equivalent in other languages – were found in almost every country or tribe. But these days, true kings – those with absolute political power – are very much the exception on the world scene. You find a few in the Middle East: in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain. Southeast Asia still boasts true powerful kings in Cambodia and Thailand and Tonga, as do a few small countries in Africa like Lesotho and Swaziland. A few countries in Europe still have kings as well – Spain, England and the Nordic countries come to mind – but these are simply figurehead positions, occupied mainly by deeply pampered and privileged jetsetters, hauled out occasionally from their villas and palaces for ceremonial occasions, but having no real political power or authority.

The explanation for this truly tectonic shift in the ways most nations are governed these days is due largely to the extraordinary success of the American experiment in democracy and representative republicanism, an experiment which in turn was based on the deeply Christian persuasion that all men and women are created equal under God, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to pursue their own individual well-being and happiness. It's safe to say that, had the American experiment failed, monarchy with its inherited privilege and authority would still be the rule, rather than the exception.

The reason I bring this up is because it points to the feelings most people in most of the world have these days about this whole business of kings and queens and royalty. Certainly most Americans, born and bred in the birthplace of this New World Order, share those feelings. After all, this nation fought a war to get out from under that whole way of doing things. Give me liberty or give me death, is our national motto, and the last thing in the world we would want is a permanent elite class of rich spoiled know-nothings running our lives. We have congress, after all!

Anyway, the point is, we don't like kings except in fairy-tales or chivalrous romance novels, because real-life kings tend to be or to become cruel, avaricious, and vain, far more concerned about themselves than they are the well-being of those over whom they rule. In fact, it might be close to the definition of a monarchy that it is a system where almost all the benefits flow downwards from the top rather than upwards from the bottom.

And given this national resistance to the idea of being ruled by a king, it is certainly very odd how easily and readily Americans – along with everyone else – uses and feels comfortable with the notion of God and Jesus as monarchs, ruling from a heavenly throne with absolute power over a subject Kingdom. And yet those are exactly the terms in which most of us were taught to understand God and respect our relationship with God.

The Gospel of John, as we have it today, was almost certainly the last written of the four Gospels, and it was almost certainly written at least in some part to address what the author recognized as growing threats to the true essence of Christ's teaching and the true meaning of who Christ was. And I think we have a clear example of that concern on the author's part in the Gospel reading for today.

The reading has at its heart the miracle of the feeding of the multitude, and the importance this particular miracle held for early Christianity is evident in the fact that it is the only one of Jesus' miracles that all four Gospel writers record. What is noteworthy, I think, is that in all four Gospels, although in somewhat different ways, the Gospel writers inform us that this miracle was performed at an extremely crucial point in Jesus' ministry. It happened at the point where the initial enthusiasm that had greeted the young Rabbi throughout the countryside gave way to an acknowledgment that what was fundamental and new about Christ's teaching would never gain wide acceptance, especially among those in positions of authority.

In other words, the miracle basically marks the point where Jesus essentially gave up the idea of addressing the whole Jewish nation, and from then on concentrated his focus on enlightening His close band of followers, His disciples.

Keeping that in mind, if we read the four different accounts of the miracle presented by the four Gospel writers, we are struck by the fact that they are all very similar except in one important detail. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the miracle is immediately followed by the disciples getting on a boat and Jesus going up a mountain to be alone, and then walking on the water during the night to rescue his disciples.

But the Gospel of John adds this amazing detail. Let's read it again:

6:14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

6:15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

In other words, John tells us that Jesus was basically fleeing from the crowd, rather than allowing them to proclaim him King.

Why would John alone of the four Gospel writers add that detail?

I think it was because, by the time John was writing his Gospel, a fundamental error in understanding Jesus was beginning to creep into Christianity, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a terrible residue of Judaism was beginning to creep back into Christianity, that old wine was being poured into the new wineskin that Jesus had supplied. And I think in many ways that very same error continues in the church down to the present day.

Let me explain.

During the course of the history of Israel, the Jewish conception of the Messiah underwent a profound transformation. Being a fairly small nation and surrounded by hostile nations of various kinds, Israel in its early years directed its hope on the emergence of a human king of great ability. Their model for such a king was their own King David, who had managed to cobble together a unified nation and lead it to victory over and peace with all its surrounding enemies. After David's death, though, things began to fall apart. Not long after the death of David's son, Solomon, the country literally split into two, and new and much more powerful enemies arose beyond their borders.

To repeat, during the early era, the Messiah the Jews longed for was basically a new David who, guided and strengthened by God, would do again for Israel what David had done in the past, unify it and subdue its enemies.

As the centuries passed, however, no such leader arose, and the new enemies of Israel proved much more dangerous and formidable than any that had confronted the nation in the past. They were no longer threatened by the Amorites, the Jebusites and the Canaanites. The enemies now were the great foreign empires like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks under Alexander, and finally the Roman legions. Against the tidal waves of the invasions and conquests by these mighty world powers, it gradually became clear even to the stubborn Jews that no human Jewish king, however gifted, could possibly be successful.

So the concept of Messiah began a transformation, and over time the nation began to think of this potential savior in supernatural terms. Rather than someone like David, a human being with human faults whom God had elevated to rulership, the Messiah, in this new conception, would in some sense **be** divine Himself. And it would be through the exercise of divine or supernatural strength that the enemies of Israel would be subdued. The Messiah came to be thought of, not as a man chosen and guided and strengthened by God, but in some sense literally as a God-Man. And it would be this God-Man who would by supernatural means conquer and subdue the enemies of Israel, and lead Israel to a position of dominance over all other nations, even the great and overwhelming empires like Rome.

That was the understanding of Messiah of the Jewish world into which Jesus was born. And if you keep that in mind, you understand much of the level of excitement that greeted Jesus as his ministry grew, because here was an individual who seemed to **have** miraculous powers over nature, someone whose personal magnetism seemed almost inhuman, such that people from all walks of life chose to abandon those lives and follow Him, someone whom even the devils obeyed.

We could go on about this at much greater depth, but for now, let's return to the scene recorded in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus has just performed the greatest miracle of his recorded ministry, turning two little fish and five biscuits into enough food to feed many thousands. No human agency could possibly accomplish that. Is it any wonder, then, that the people reacted in the way they did:

6:14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

This must be the divine or semi-divine being for whom they had been waiting and praying for centuries, the one who would use that divine, supernatural strength to save Israel, to subdue all its enemies, and to restore the nation to its rightful place of political dominance as God's chosen people over the rest of the world.

But as John emphasizes:

6:15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Now Jesus certainly was the God-man – this is at the heart of our Christian faith – and clearly He did offer Himself to the nation of Israel as their long awaited Messiah. But as our Gospel reading indicates, the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed and established was nothing at all like the one Israel imagined. Christ's kingdom is the kingdom of Heaven, not the Kingdom of Israel. This a point Jesus made repeatedly. From the very first recognition by Peter, that Jesus was the Messiah, when Jesus immediately says *And my mission as Messiah is to die*, right up to the very end when he tells Pontius Pilate: *My kingdom is not of this world*, Jesus is emphasizing that the type of dominion He was establishing was nothing at all like what the world understands by dominion.

The true nature of Christ's dominion is, of course, what we try to preach about most Sundays, but this Sunday, what I want us to attend to is what I said earlier: the fact that John is the only Gospel that makes mention of this in the account of the feeding of the multitude.

By the time John's Gospel was written, probably 60 or 70 years after the death of Jesus, many different interpretations of the gospel had begun to circulate, and I believe that one of those interpretations that the author of the gospel feared the most was the view that Jesus would return to rule as an earthly King. It was the view that the Jewish conception of the Messiah was in fact correct, it had simply been postponed until the Second Coming, when Jesus would ride back to earth on a cloud, hurling thunderbolts, and would forcefully subdue the whole world to His rule.

Now there is no question but that there are passages elsewhere in the New Testament – particularly in the First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, and in the book of Revelation – which do convey this picture of the Second Coming. But in my own view, these passages simply illustrate the false interpretation that the author of the Gospel of John was vigorously arguing against, the interpretation that had begun to corrupt Christ's message, almost from the very beginning. And

here's what's important: It is an interpretation that continues to dominate many large segments of Christianity down to the present day.

To put this in terms we have used in previous sermons, I believe along with the author of John, that Jesus during His earthly ministry revealed to us the full and true nature of God, and what He revealed was that true kingship - kingship as heaven understands it – is found in humility and anonymity and sacrificial service. I believe that in the culmination of all things, every knee will indeed bow to Jesus, but only because Jesus is Himself bowing to God, and God is Himself bowing to Jesus and to all of us. I believe Jesus when he said “...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,” (Matthew 10:45), just as I believe Him when He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30)

In many, many churches you will hear something like this: *The first time Christ came as a servant; the second time he will come as a King.*

I believe this is profoundly misleading. I believe, and the author of the Gospel of John believes, that the first time Jesus did already come as a King, but as a king the way heaven understands kingship, as one who serves and sacrifices Himself. And the second coming will be when that King Jesus, that heavenly king, reappears in the life of every individual Christian, removing the robe of royalty and donning the apron of a servant, bending his or her knee to wash the feet of the other children of God.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father God, is that you keep us ever mindful that your kingdom is not of this world, that the heavenly palace is a manger and the heavenly throne a carpenter’s stool, that the heavenly robe is a servant’s apron and the heavenly diadem a crown of thorns, because those are what Jesus wore, and we offer this prayer in His name, the name above all names. Amen.