

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

As we come to the last Sunday of the Liturgical Year and begin to think about Advent and the birth of the Jesus at Christmas, we are propelled forward in this morning's Gospel lesson, in about the most jarring way I can imagine, to the crucifixion. And, even more jarring in my view, with the story of Jesus' crucifixion we are celebrating—if that's the right word, given his intense suffering on the cross—his kingship. The Roman Catholic tradition marks this Sunday as the Feast of Christ the King, and we Anglicans celebrate it in similar ways, though we don't view it as a major feast. In any case, if Jesus were a king, as indeed the Christian tradition claims, this seems to me a strange way to celebrate it—by pointing to what was intended by his enemies to be his greatest humiliation, death on a Roman cross, hanging between two criminals.

This is not the place to recite all the evidence, but if we step back a moment and look at the big picture, that is, the wider context of the life and ministry of Jesus, early Christians viewed his crucifixion, perhaps paradoxically, as the culmination of all that he was trying to accomplish. We've been hearing parts of this bigger story in the last few weeks, and we'll hear more as move into a new church year. In short, the New Testament, like the Old, retells the story of the entire world *as* the story of Israel, but in the New Testament, the story of Israel is then retold as the story of Jesus. The overall effect of portraying Jesus in this way is that the New Testament tells its stories about Jesus in order to *subvert* both the world's stories and Israel's stories in ways that lead finally to the claim that Jesus is sovereign or king of the entire world (NT Wright, *The New Testament and the*

People of God, p. 469). I probably don't have to say that this is no small claim. Against Jewish claims, Jesus is viewed as the Messiah, the anointed one, the king of the Jews. Against Roman claims about Caesar, Jesus is viewed as both Lord and King. In neither case, however, would it be obvious to an outside observer that these claims were true. The New Testament's claim not really a "proof" so much as it is an invitation to "come and see," just as when Jesus invited his first disciples to follow him.

Luke's portrayal of the crucifixion shows some of this subversiveness. There were others before and after Jesus claiming to be the Messiah, and there were many Jews who were not particularly interested in seeing a Messiah appear—they were doing quite well with the current conditions under Rome, thank you very much. There were also debates about exactly what the Messiah would be like and how he might be recognized if and when he did appear. For example, some thought the Messiah might combine the roles of priest and king, while others believed he would share the high priestly role with another leader who would rule at his side. Still others linked the Messiah to the mysterious "son of man" figure, and later Christians often see this as some kind of divine claim though likely it was not originally intended in this way. As usual with ancient Judaism, views about the Messiah were complicated and conflicted. However, almost everyone agreed that the Messiah would free the Jews from the oppression of foreign rulers, whether it be Rome or some other nation. In other words, just about everyone viewed the Messiah as *a military leader*. Jesus was obviously not such a leader, though he was viewed as somewhat of a revolutionary which, in part, may help explain why he was crucified. Instead, as we've seen the last few weeks, Jesus argued that his fellow Jews were terribly and

tragically mistaken to believe their freedom and God's kingdom would come with violence. As he said during his trial, his kingdom is not of this world; it is not that kind of kingdom and he is not that kind of king.

Going forward, this view of Jesus as the Messiah—very soon translated into Greek as “the Christ”—creates all kinds of problems for the new church. Christians were misunderstood and persecuted by Rome because they would not swear allegiance to Caesar, and they were misunderstood and persecuted by other Jews because they viewed themselves as the true inheritors of all the promises given to Israel by God—that was one of the principal points of their subversive stories. For Rome, Christians were viewed as atheists and as a nuisance. For other Jews (and I say, “other Jews,” since most of the early Christians were Jews themselves), they were viewed as simply, if dangerously, delusional—if Rome was still in control, then by definition the Messiah had not come (and still hasn't come in the view of most Jews of the last 2000 years).

One of the interesting things that stands out in this ongoing debate between Christians and Jews has to do with the inscription that was added over the dying Jesus: “This is the King of the Jews.” We are told in other Gospel accounts of the crucifixion that some Jewish leaders objected to this inscription, which most believe was put there by Pilate to mock Jesus and, perhaps, both Jesus and those Jewish leaders who maneuvered to have him crucified. In other words, Pilate looked down his nose at both Jesus and the Jewish leaders who wanted him out of the way, and this was his way of saying so. It was like he was saying, “So, this is best you can do?” But the fact that it was there at all suggests that, indeed, Jesus may indeed have been viewed as the Messiah in his life time, or at least by the time he died. This conclusion is very controversial for modern

biblical scholars, many of whom believe the early church read this conclusion back into the story of Jesus. But it is plausible, I believe, if we grant that Jesus did not view the Messiah as a military leader, but rather as someone who would fulfill the hopes and dreams of Israel in ways that Jews could not imagine or, finally, accept.

I think I've told this story before, but some years ago I was invited into the Kairos prison ministry by members of this parish and I joined them at McNeal Island for a number of visits. In one of those visits, I was asked to give a talk to the inmates present at the weekend retreat about the meaning of the cross, at the end of which they were invited publicly to accept and wear the cross as a sign of their commitment to the Christian faith. In my talk, I created a bit of stir—not among the inmates, but among some on the Kairos team—when I explained to them that the wearing of the cross for early Christians would be analogous to us today wearing a small electric chair. Again, the inmates got this, but some of the Kairos team didn't seem to like being reminded that, what is perhaps central symbol of the Christian faith, was originally an embarrassment. Paul and other authors in the New Testament made much of this, calling the cross a scandal, though by the time Paul wrote, 25 years after the crucifixion, it was one that they gladly owned.

When we realize the depth of the scandal associated with Jesus dying on a cross and, at the same time, viewing that cross as itself a sign that Jesus was Lord of the Gentiles and King or Messiah of the Jews, Christians today may be tempted, like some of my colleagues during the Kairos Weekend, to gloss over this fact or, more likely, just not realize it given our historical distance. But, like many of other things said of and by Jesus, this is yet one more audacious claim. It doesn't make

it wrong or unfounded for being audacious, but it does cry out for us to understand it and own it, but to do so humbly and not triumphantly. Jesus was a king, but he was not the king that either the Jews or the Romans were expecting. This begs the question, with Advent coming next week, about what kind of king we may be expecting and how we should be following him as our king. I leave us to ponder that question for the next few weeks. Amen.