

Christ the King

Did you know that the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, differ from the Gospel of John because they portray Jesus as making only one journey to Jerusalem while John's Gospel, on the other hand, has Jesus traveling there various times. Thus the first and final entrance of Jesus into the city in Matthew, Mark and Luke is of much greater importance than the several entrances Jesus makes into Jerusalem in John's Gospel. Indeed, as these first three Gospels portray things, Jesus' entire life and activity is a preparation for this final appearance in Jerusalem. His life is a journey to Jerusalem. Do you remember the phrase, a rendezvous with destiny? We could use it to describe the first three Gospels' description of Jesus' going up to Jerusalem. There he will meet his fate, his destiny. There his work will achieve its fulfillment.

What was his work? Most scholars today would agree that Jesus was put to death as a Messianic pretender. Of course the Romans, who actually put him to death, would not have understood the term messiah because this was a Jewish term. The Jewish leaders who brought Jesus before Pilate would have had to present Jesus to him in a way which he could understand. The man was a rabble rouser, they told him, a political revolutionary, someone who might

possibly threaten Rome's power and therefore someone whom Pilate should remove. But for them Jesus was a false messiah. The true messiah, in their minds, would be a man who would reestablish them as a free nation, a free people, and Jesus had not done that. But he was causing trouble, both among themselves, and potentially with the Romans, and so they wanted him removed.

But how did Jesus see himself? He was uncomfortable with the title messiah when people applied it to him. The popular understanding of a messiah as a political revolutionary, a new king like David of old, did not fit his own understanding of himself and his life and work. Instead he believed that God's kingdom was coming to the people in and through him in a new way, a different way. He hammered away at his new understanding of God's kingdom in his words and actions. His words spoke of God's forgiving love, and his actions spoke of God's healing love. That is what he wanted people to accept. If they did, they would find themselves living in a new way. They would find themselves free, no matter who was their political leader, because God's healing and forgiving love would have changed them, would have made them new people.

Some people understood him and accepted his message and became different people, but the vast majority did not. And so when Jesus finally approached the city, riding on a donkey and not on a horse as a conquering messiah would have done, he knew that his rendezvous with destiny would be a rendezvous with defeat and death. In Luke's account we read that when he saw the city, he wept over it and foretold its future destruction, a prophecy which was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans, in response to a Jewish messianic uprising, destroyed the city and its temple.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, of its ordinary time. Next Sunday we will begin the season of Advent. On this last Sunday the church chooses to celebrate Jesus as a king, even though he does not fit the ordinary understanding of that word. A king—when there were real kings—was power. He was close to God who was also thought of as all-powerful. Why then has the church created this feast? And isn't it totally out of date today? Maybe we should celebrate Jesus as president, not as king, since presidents have taken the place of kings in our world today. What is the sense of this celebration? Its sense is that it gives the church a chance to acknowledge this humble man Jesus, the man on the donkey, the man crying over Jerusalem, as the very embodiment of true kingship, of true power, of the true God. The feast wants to

change our understanding of who God is, of what power is. Power is not force; power is not violence; power is love, power is forgiveness, power is mercy and compassion.

If we accept Jesus and his reinterpretation of divine power, of God, we have to change our understanding of what it means to live a good human life. Our lives will be good insofar as they conform to this reinterpretation of divine power. That is the truth which Jesus represents. That is the kind of king God is. That is the kind of king Jesus was and is. And if we live this kind of truth, we are promised that it will set us free. Free from what? From our false understanding of God and ourselves. So a change from one kind of life to another. How can we describe this change more concretely? One author put it this way: “The crucial change in life is the turn from selfishness to love. We either live basically for self-satisfaction, or we have opened up to respond to real needs around us.” May this change take place in our own lives a little more each day!