

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Christ the King – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

ACNA Readings – Daniel 7:9-14; Psalm 93; Revelation 1:1-8; John 18:33-37

Seasonal Introduction. The last Sunday in the Church year is known as the Reign of Christ or Feast of Christ the King. It is a recent addition to the liturgical calendar, having been added by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Pius XI instituted the feast day during a time that saw the rise of fascism and militant nationalism to remind the faithful that God is the ultimate king.

Common Theme. Kingship is the obvious theme that runs through our readings this week. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a democracy, which can seemingly be at odds with our modern, independent and freedom-loving societies. We may not appreciate monarchy here on earth, but we all have to acknowledge that our Saviour and Redeemer is also our Lord and King.

Hebraic Context. Kings were already in place and spoken of in the first recorded histories of Egypt and Mesopotamia. They have never ceased to be important in world history, and yet, since the end of the 18th century, our understanding of kings and kingship has drastically changed.² And so, our understanding of God as King may also be diminished.

A monarchy was the form of government that the Scriptures actually allowed, “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it...You may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose.” However, there were a few limits even with that.

The king was to be an Israelite. The king was not to acquire excessive horses (military might, particularly from Egypt—whose chariots and horses God had been able to defeat without man’s assistance). The king was not to acquire excessive wives (political might, as political alliances were often formed and kept through marriage). Nor was the king to acquire excessive silver and gold (economic might: often acquired through military expeditions and raids, high taxes of the people, or political alliances). Greed, whether the desire for an expanded border through military might, political bartering, or even simply money, “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” was not to be part of a king’s rule. What the king was supposed to do was write, by hand, a copy of the law.³

¹ Alternate RCL Readings: II Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-19

² There have been places and times in history where kings had a diminished role in society: the Greek city-states, the Roman republic, the Magna Carta and later the English revolution, the Enlightenment and subsequent revolutions in France and the American states, and the rise of modern democracy. However, kings and queens today are often considered nominal rulers at best while anyone with actual authority in their countries are often called dictators instead of kings.

³ Sanhedrin 21b.6 stated that the king should bring the scroll he wrote with him when He went out for war, when he returned from war, when he sat in judgment, and when he reclined to eat. The word of God should be available in any situation the king found himself in that it might be consulted.

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The ancient world understood the nature of kings and kingship. They ruled over all their people. However, God declared that even (or especially) the king should read His law so that he would learn to fear the LORD his God and act in accordance with God's law. The king should also know their position as simply another Israelite, one from among his brethren, and remain humble.⁴

God, on the other hand, does not need to remain humble. He can clothe Himself in pride.⁵ As the creator and judge, He is the ultimate ruler and king and should be obeyed absolutely. The alternative would be that everyone would do “whatever is right in his own eyes.”⁶

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14.⁷ In a vision, Daniel was shown four great beasts, each of them terrifying. But Daniel was also shown a vision of something akin to the court of heaven where God Himself rules and reigns. Thrones were placed where the Ancient of Days would judge.⁸ Books were brought before Him and, although the beasts were terrifying to Daniel, they were judged and prosecuted without any complications.⁹

⁴ Unfortunately, while the early judges and kings of Israel were shepherds who were to diligently care for their flock, the history of the Bible portrays human failure in the monarchy. By the 2nd Temple period, apocalyptic literature described kings and kingdoms as beasts (such as Daniel and I Enoch). Rather than serving their flock, they oppressed God's people.

Nonetheless, Paul (in Romans 13:1-5) still stated that we should be subject to our governing authorities. This was spoken in the Roman Empire, which had an immense system of slavery and oppression by Emperors utterly opposed to both the Jewish and Christian populace. Additionally, the Roman Empire was constantly at war with foreign nations. There will come a time when God ceases human monarchy but He will remain on the throne forever as He establishes His kingdom over the world to come.

Meanwhile, we can pray for and submit to our earthly kings.

⁵ See Psalm 93

⁶ Deuteronomy 12:8 as well as Judges 17:6 and 21:25. The Wisdom of Ben Sirach 5:2-3 states, “Do not follow your inclination and strength in pursuing the desires of your heart. Do not say, ‘Who can have power over me?’ for the Lord will surely punish you.”

⁷ ACNA includes Daniel 7:11-12

⁸ The Ancient of Days is a term that is only found in the book of Daniel as it is an Aramaic term. The figure spoken of in Daniel 7 is clearly God. However, there is some debate as to which person of the Godhead. The Eastern Orthodox church believes, as the Ancient of Days is seen, it cannot be God the Father but must be God the Son. They would further argue that Jesus is the judge, further solidifying their argument. The Western Catholic and Protestant churches most commonly believe that the Ancient of Days is God the Father as one approaches Him as the Son of Man, coming with the clouds—which both Mark and John the Revelator clearly depict as God the Son.

⁹ The idea of God keeping books in heaven is seen several times in Scripture. Moses, in Exodus 32:32-33 mentions a book, likely the Book of Life spoken of in Psalm 69:28, Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5 and 20:12-15. And finally there is the Book of Remembrance mentioned in Malachi 3:16. The book of life, at least, seems to be a record of all those who are righteous.

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However, many Jewish commentators have struggled with the wording used in Daniel as he spoke of thrones rather than a throne. The clear indication in Jewish understanding was that there must then be at least two thrones in heaven. But if there is one God, shouldn't there only be one throne in heaven? Indeed, the Ancient of Days took up one throne. So the question for the early sages was: who would sit on the other throne?

Rabbi Akiva declared that one throne was for God but the other was for David (or the Messiah). He was immediately rebuffed as this could have sounded like there were two powers in heaven.¹⁰ This came about because there was a belief in God and the Messiah both having authority and ruling from the throne of glory in the 2nd Temple Period. This was rejected as heresy by the time of the codification of the Gemara.¹¹ Nonetheless, a second figure did come before the Ancient of Days. The son of man approached the Ancient of Days and was given an everlasting dominion by the Ancient of Days. He doesn't immediately take a place on a throne. And so Daniel, as so often was the case, did not record what the second throne was used for.¹²

Psalm 93.¹³ "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Psalm 93 makes use of the power of nature, specifically the floods and the sea, in creation to prove that God reigns while man has no power or control. The sea was a powerful mystery to the people of antiquity, particularly the Jewish people who did very little on the sea. The unfathomable sea

¹⁰ Rabbi Yosei the Galilean stated that the thrones must represent judgment and righteousness. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya used Isaiah 66:1 to state that the first throne was to sit and judge while the second would have been the Ancient of Day's footstool, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." Hagigah 14a.5-6

¹¹ I Enoch 45:3 mentions God's chosen one would sit on the throne of glory. It goes even further in I Enoch 62:5 where a son of a woman would sit on the throne of glory. The Qumran community also gave credence to a powerful messiah who would rule with the sons of light (themselves, of course) and one text may even give a question of whether the messiah would actually be God. Mark and John the Revelator certainly spoke of Jesus as being the Son of Man, coming with the clouds, and ruling with authority.

¹² Even in Revelation 5, the Lamb did not take a seat on a throne, choosing instead to stand at the right hand of the one actually enthroned. This is also what Stephen saw as he was killed. Nonetheless, Jesus, in Revelation 3:21, declared that He "sat down with my Father on His throne." Likewise, Mark 16:19 states, "So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." Hebrews 1:3 also stated, "After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Peter in his sermon in Acts 2:33-36 argued that it was not David himself who would sit on the throne (as Rabbi Akiva would later state) but Jesus. Finally, Revelation 20 speaks of the one who would judge from the opened books while seated on the great white throne. All three major Christian traditions believe this will be Jesus as the Judge.

¹³ While no author is attributed to this short Psalm dedicated to the rule and reign of the Lord, the Septuagint does state that the Psalm is "for the day before the Sabbath, when the land was first inhabited, the praise of a song by David." (Brenton's Septuagint Psalm 92:1 in the LXX)

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could provide food and opportunity for travel and trade but it was also chaotic—unruly, uncontrollable, violent, and dangerous.¹⁴

However, as powerful, dangerous, and uncontrollable as the oceans are, God is mightier. He made it and all the creatures that live in it. God reigns. While man has no room to be proud, God robed Himself in pride (or majesty).¹⁵ Majesty easily fits in with the idea of grandeur and sovereign authority of God, but the connection to pride is not so easy. When we think of the word pride it is usually associated in a negative way. And, for the human race, pride is not a favourable characteristic. When looking at our history we rarely have much to be proud of. But for God it is the opposite. Everything He has done has been wondrous. And He rightfully can wrap Himself in pride. He made the world and He alone can boast in its beauty.

Psalm 93 is a short five verse declaration of God’s authority and kingship. It describes the Creation, the Throne of Heaven, and the House of God but the Lord is higher than all these wondrous things. As the creator, God rules over all of the universe. His throne was established in eternity. This declaration of truth should continue to be a comfort in a world that is so often uncertain. We cannot control nature even with all our technology and pride.¹⁶ But we do know the one who rules and reigns—it would behoove us to proclaim God, and His Son, as King every day.

Revelation 1:4b-8.¹⁷ We often think of Revelation in terms of future, world-ending events. However, it opens precisely how it states it will, by revealing the present reality of the world to

¹⁴ Israel was never a maritime power, they would occasionally send merchants south through Eilat and the Red Sea but even then they used Phoenician sailors (I Kings 9:26-29; II Chronicles 8:17-18). Instead of being a great blessing, the sea, like the desert, was seen as a place of chaos and demons. It was from the sea that the great beasts arose in Daniel and Revelation.

Psalm 103:23-32 poetically described an expedition by sea.

“Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, His wondrous works in the deep. For He commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.”

¹⁵ In English, the verse declared that God was “robed in majesty”. The word translated as “majesty” is ΠΙΛῆ *ge’ut* but is commonly used as the word for pride (see Isaiah 28:1; Isaiah 28:3; Psalm 17:10).

¹⁶ Even today only an estimated 26.1% of the seafloor has been mapped out, and that simply by technology. Much less has been actively explored. Hurricanes, cyclones, and tsunamis cause massive damage in both infrastructure and lives lost (an estimated 227,000 people died in 2004’s Indian Ocean Tsunami alone).

¹⁷ ACNA includes Revelation 1:1-4a

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seven churches.¹⁸ It has been suggested that the book of Revelation was written during a time of persecution (or the perceived threat of persecution) of the emerging church. In antiquity, the Roman Caesar ruled the known world, yet Revelation would like us to remember that it is God who sits on the ultimate throne and reveals that Jesus is the real king of the world.¹⁹

This passage presents several titles of Jesus. He is the “faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of kings on earth”. This seems to clearly recall the covenant with God’s chosen one in Psalm 89. God swore to David “I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.” Ethan, in Psalm 89, would proceed to speak about the firstborn who would be “the highest of the kings of the earth”. David’s offspring would endure forever, “his throne as long as the sun before me.” His throne would be a “faithful witness in the skies.”²⁰

Beyond that, Proverbs 14:5 and 25 note that a “faithful witness does not lie” and “a truthful witness saves lives”.²¹ The introduction clearly states just who was speaking and why it matters that He was the one doing the revealing. Of course it is important that He loves us, but without

¹⁸ The book of Revelation, Ἀποκάλυψις *apokalypsis* in Greek, is the *Apokalypsis* of Jesus the Messiah. Today we often use the word apocalypse to mean something powerful, destructive, and practically unstoppable—often in reference to the end of the world. The Greek word *apokalypsis* actually means to unveil, reveal, or to take out of hiding—thus the translation to Revelation.

Apocalyptic literature was a common genre in Jewish tradition, going back to the books of Ezekiel and Daniel. As a genre, they endeavour to reveal the spiritual, or heavenly, realities to present day events or challenges. It is possible that our linguistic evolution of the word apocalypse skews our understanding of Revelation. Jesus was the one unveiling the spiritual reality to John and He was also often the subject that was being revealed.

¹⁹ The Revelation of Jesus the Messiah to John is not a book you read to know the exact date of the end times. It does not reveal who the antichrist is and it won’t reveal what exactly is the mark of the beast. First and foremost, it is a book about worship and devotion to God. Everyone is worshiping the Lord throughout the revelation to John. Angels worship God and the Lamb; the elders around the throne worship; all nations of every tribe and tongue worship the King and the Lamb. Some passages from Revelation are so powerful in their phraseology of worship that they are included in most liturgies of our churches (for example Revelation 5:12-13).

There is a unique blessing for those who read aloud and hear the words of Revelation according to verse 3. But we should also keep, or obey, what is written within Revelation. Revelation encourages us to have an eternal perspective of the world, to have hope in our present sufferings, and invites us to worship God and the Lamb along with the hosts of heaven.

²⁰ Skies is not the expected term for “heavens” (שָׁמַיִם, *shama'im*), although the Septuagint did translate it as heavens (οὐρανῶ, *ourano*), but rather שָׁחַק (*shahaq*) which is often associated with both the heavens and the clouds. Daniel 7 also noted that the Son of Man would come with the clouds to the throne which Revelation 1:7 picks up on.

²¹ While the Hebrew uses the term אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*, faithfulness) and אֱמֶת (*emet*, true), the LXX translated them both as μαρτυρῶν πιστός, as in Revelation 1:5.

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the power to save lives, raise people from the dead, and rule forever even His love would be very much like our own.

Before He began to reveal the reality of the seven churches to them, He made one final statement, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." Alpha and Omega are the beginning and ending letters of the Greek alphabet and function as the saying, "the First and the Last". This was never a title of Jesus during His earthly ministry. While Jesus was on earth, He typically referred to Himself as the Son of Man (who Mark clearly associated with Daniel—the one who would come with the clouds). Now in heaven, He bore the title of the First and the Last.

A wise man once said, there is nothing new under the sun. The term "the First and the Last" was used by Isaiah to describe the Lord God. For example, Isaiah 44:6 reads, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and His redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.'" In Isaiah 48:12-13, the First and the Last laid the foundations of the world and ordered the universe. God created all things, this is clear from Genesis through the prophets and Psalms. But Isaiah 48:16 continued by saying "And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and His Spirit." The First and the Last, who laid the foundation of the earth, was sent by God. John's argument as He opened up his gospel and Jesus' statement in His revelation to the churches is nothing new. God [the Father] sent the creator [God the Son]. In Revelation 1:8, Jesus declared that He is the Almighty.

John 18:33-37. Pontius Pilate was the governor of the Roman province of Judea from c. 27-37 AD. Pilate was in a difficult position. He had to watch out for the interests of the Roman Empire while trying to appease the local population and keep them from rebelling. Jesus was incredibly popular among the vast majority of the Jewish population in the Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. On the other hand, Jesus had clearly offended one of Rome's few allies amongst the Jewish people, the temple leadership.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus' reply to Pilate's question is still pertinent. Jesus did not deny having a kingdom. He is king.²² But unlike earthly kingdoms, which have borders and restrictions (even the exalted Roman empire), everyone who is of the truth listens to Jesus' voice. The question of whether Jesus was a king and, thus, a threat to the Roman empire would have made Pilate's decision easy to justify to his superiors while (hopefully) minimizing the consequent outcry from the local populace.

²² This should not be ignored. God's kingdom is not a democracy where we all have a say in how things should run. We can pray. We can even ask questions. But even in our questioning of God He doesn't have to explain Himself—He certainly didn't explain Himself to Job. Freedom in Jesus the King does not mean we can do whatever we desire, whatever is right in our own eyes. Jesus called us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." To declare that Jesus is King, as He is, means we are to submit ourselves to His rule and reign, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

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Jesus' response made Pilate's decision that much harder. Pilate even tried to send Jesus to Herod, the ruler of Galilee where Jesus was from, to pass on the responsibility as he was reluctant to crucify such a popular man.²³ In the end, however, Pilate would pass judgment on Jesus and crucify Him.²⁴

But if Jesus' kingdom wasn't of this world, why was Jesus born in this world? It wasn't simply to be a king, Jesus was, according to John, the creator of the world. Jesus came to bear witness to the truth.²⁵ Jesus assured Pilate that He was not a direct political threat when He declared that His kingdom is not of this world. No, the Kingdom of Heaven wasn't going to fight Rome but it would control the hearts and minds of those on this earth who make up the Kingdom of Heaven.²⁶

Hebraic Perspective. The vision of God sitting on a throne is described by many of the prophets while the concept of the throne of God is mentioned in several Psalms. As an object, thrones are usually reserved for monarchs. While the Hebrew Scriptures do not use the term the kingdom of God, the idea that the Lord was king is prolific. Samuel the prophet disliked the creation of human monarchy seeing it as a usurpation of God as king (1 Samuel 12:12-13). The Psalms (which are the yearly, weekly, and daily prayers of the people) declared God to be king

²³ Even Pontius Pilate's wife asked him to "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of Him today in a dream."

²⁴ Tragically, the death of Jesus in Jerusalem at the hand of Roman leadership, at the behest of the Jewish temple leadership, has so often been used to both allow and encourage antisemitism in the Christian world. The early church was careful to declare that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the Nicene Creed but neither that nor the promises God has made with Israel has stopped many in the church from acting directly against God's command to love our neighbours.

²⁵ While Pilate would not be familiar with the Scriptures and would ask, "What is truth" John's entire discourse was about the Word become flesh, ... full of grace and truth. John, more than any other writer, focused on this reality. John spoke of witnessing and testifying (μαρτυρεω, from which we get the term martyr from) 33 times in his Gospel and a further 10 times in the epistles of John, well more than half the 76 times the word is used in the New Testament. In addition, John spoke 25 times of truth in his Gospel and, incredibly, 20 times in the epistles of John.

Twice in the Septuagint, the translators chose to speak of truth and witness in close approximation. Proverbs 29:14 states, "If a king faithfully (αληθεια, *altheia*) judges the poor, his throne will be established forever (μαρτυριον, *marturion*)." Surely this describes no one better than Jesus who came to set at liberty those who are oppressed and whose throne has been established forever. The other time was in Psalm 25:10, "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness (αληθεια, *altheia*), for those who keep His covenant and His testimonies (μαρτυρια, *marturia*)." We should desire to keep His covenant and His testimonies, as Jesus said, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

²⁶ Hopefully, unlike Pilate, we know what the truth is. However, perhaps we should ask if we listen to the voice of the King. As we finish this liturgical year, have we been faithful in keeping His covenant and His testimonies this past year?

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(from Psalm 10:16 to Psalm 149:2). Even the earthly kings of Judah, such as Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:6) and Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:16) acknowledged that God ruled every kingdom.

Psalm 93:2 described the Lord's throne as having been established "from of old".²⁷ The throne of God is one of the seven things that were, according to Jewish tradition, said to have been created before the world.²⁸ There is a timeless aspect to the rule and reign of God. When David sat on his throne in Jerusalem, he sat on a real throne. However, the throne also represented authority and power—these are concepts that are real, can be felt and experienced, but are also not physical. The prophet Nathan used the image of a throne to declare that David's house would continue to rule and reign, "Your throne will be established forever."

Most Jewish sages considered God to be incorporeal. The New Testament affirmed that the Lord is Spirit (John 4:24). Hence God does not possess a physical form and, therefore, has no requirement for a literal throne. On the other hand, all visions of the heavenly realm in Scripture include a seated figure surrounded by worshippers, both angelic and human (Isaiah 6, Revelation 4). In those vision experiences the throne in heaven is described accurately and with some detail. Which begs the question, what did they see?

This reflects classic Hebraic tension, the throne of God is both a literal object and a metaphorical one. Psalm 89:14 described the throne allegorically as "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you."²⁹ But the epistle of Hebrews describes Jesus as having ascended to heaven and "is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." This is implied to be a real event (Mark 16:19, Hebrews 1:3, and Hebrews 12:2) but also shows God in terms that are anthropomorphic for the sake of our understanding. The tension of a physical, metaphorical, and even anthropomorphical understanding of God and His throne is held together through faith.³⁰

²⁷ The Hebrew term, *מֵעַתָּה* (me'az, from then) is a timeframe that is generally relative to whatever timeline it is near. So Genesis 39:4-5 states that Joseph found favour with Potiphar and it was "from the time that he made him overseer in his house... the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake." Meanwhile, Psalm 93:2 is in a timeline relative to creation and the One who is from everlasting.

²⁸ *Pesachim* 54a.8 states that, besides the Throne of Glory, the other six things created before the world were: the Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. The belief that the Throne of Glory was created before the world (along with the Temple) came from Jeremiah 17:12.

²⁹ Rabbi Yosei the Galilean used this verse in his argument with Rabbi Akiva regarding the two thrones in heaven to state that one of the thrones was for judgment and the other one was for righteousness.

³⁰ This isn't a faith that states: I don't understand it, but God revealed it to us so I suppose I'd better accept it. God is a proven king who rules and reigns over nature, kingdoms, and the hearts of His people. This has been true as long as history has been and, while we cannot understand everlasting from everlasting past to everlasting future there is evidence that God is and that He has, is and will continue to reign.

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God is indeed the only true King who rules and reigns in the hearts of His people but also in the heavenly realm where heaven itself can be called the throne of God. His throne is from everlasting, past to future and most definitely present. God's kingdom is a place where righteousness and justice exist and His throne is one where Jesus currently resides and makes intercession for us.