

Jesus Our King
Isaiah 33:13-24

As we Americans celebrated this past week, we haven't had a king since the first thirteen of our states seceded from the British Empire. Yes, about 10 million of us did tune into the coronation of King Charles III earlier this summer, enjoying all that pomp and pageantry, along with some first-rate choral music. But those admittedly impressive images from Westminster Abbey probably reflect the way that most of us think about modern kings: they are primarily traditional, ceremonial and symbolic, and thus mainly harmless.

For let's face it: we Americans would not at all be interested in having a real absolute monarch, some man or woman whose every word is law, someone who wields all political power over the rest of us just because he or she comes from a royal family. No, we call such people tyrants, and we have fought many wars to remove them from their positions of authority. We Americans don't want to have anything to do with autocratic government. Instead, we want to have input. We want to have freedoms and rights that can't be taken away.

But there's only one problem with our very American passion for freedom: the fact is that all Americans, indeed all human beings really are living in an absolute monarchy. For the fact is that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David, really is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the rightful ruler over Heaven and Earth. That is, after all, exactly what He Himself claimed to be in our responsive reading: the Son of Man Who would one day sit on the throne of His glory, judging all the nations.

But how does Jesus' claim fit with our Independence Day celebrations? After all, don't we Americans cherish our freedom of religion? Don't we claim the right to believe whatever we wish, and to embrace whatever creed we choose? I mean, we don't throw people in jail just because they are Buddhists or Hindus, atheists or agnostics. We don't even throw Muslims in jail for teaching that the government should be overthrown, unless they first make an attempt to blow something up.

So, in our land of pluralism and freedom, does that somehow mean that Jesus is only the King of the Christians? Does that mean His absolute authority only applies to those who recognize it? Do we believe that His power depends on people's willingness to bow before Him?

Well, think about what that would mean for any other sort of ruler or elected official. What would happen, for example, if a sheriff only had authority over those who chose to obey the laws he is sworn to enforce? We'd have the sort of anarchy that seems to be overtaking many of our largest cities, with homeless people building encampments wherever they choose, regardless of zoning restrictions, and with convicted felons committing mass murder with weapons it's already illegal for them to possess.

Or think about the crowds of people crossing our borders without going through all the legal processes required for immigration. Shouldn't everyone who comes into this country have to obey our laws, even if they are citizens of other countries? After all, if you are in America, the law is the law and that is that, right?

And do any of us have the option not to follow the laws just because we don't approve of the person who happens to be holding power at the time? After all, Republicans have obeyed the laws during the Biden administration, and Democrats obeyed the laws when Donald Trump was President. That's what the rule of law means, and the rule of law is one of the things that has made America so stable and so safe for so many years.

Okay, so what does all that mean where it comes to King Jesus? Well, just as is the case with all merely human rulers, there really is only one choice available to any of us: to recognize the legitimate rule of Christ, or to deny His authority. But if Jesus really is Who He claims to be, if He really is the Son of Man Who really is coming again to judge the living and the dead, there can be no place or person outside His jurisdiction. For if Jesus really is the King of Kings, can anyone, regardless of his or her personal beliefs, possibly be immune from or excused from following His commands?

Look, we all know that where it comes to obeying the laws of earthly rulers, the only choices are peace or prison. Just so, if Jesus is the Lord of Lords, doesn't it simply stand to reason that disobeying Him will lead to big problems, just as big benefits logically flow from being in a right relationship with Him?

Well, that is exactly the point Isaiah is making in today's passage, and really in all of chapters 32 and 33. So, let's first take a look at the bad news. What can those who rebel against King Jesus expect? The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that Jesus will restrain and conquer all His enemies. Isaiah puts it in much more poetic language in verse 14: "The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: 'Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?'" After all, When the One comes who is like a refiner's fire, will anyone be able to stand in His presence? When the Son of Man sits in judgment on all the nations of the earth, will anyone be able to plead immunity from His righteous rule?

No, Isaiah makes quite clear in the verses right before today's passage that there will be no good news for those who are loyal to any other king, those who place their trust in anyone or anything else. For after all, none of the false gods in which anyone might choose to put their faith can possibly do them any good: jobs, clothes, status, beauty, talent, wealth – all will be useless on the day the King comes to divide the sheep from the goats. Isaiah puts it this way in verses 11 and 12: "You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble; your breath is a fire that will consume you. And the peoples will be as if burned to lime, like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire."

But if Isaiah has terrible news for those who remain in rebellion against the King also has wonderful news for those who remain loyal to Him. For if Jesus restrains and conquers His enemies, that necessarily means He also puts our enemies to flight. And that means that, if we are on Jesus' side, the very people who oppress us and persecute us will end up in big trouble, for they are ranging themselves in opposition to the Almighty King.

Yes, on that great day of the Lord, that great day of judgment, all of God's enemies, all those who belong to unbelieving nations will be confounded. For on that day, Isaiah promises that "You will see no more the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a tongue that you cannot understand" (verse 19).

But why would that have been such good news for the people of God in Isaiah's day? Because they were being oppressed by their neighbors who spoke different languages: the Assyrians and the Babylonians. But the same promise remains good news for Christians today, who increasingly find ourselves to be alienated from a culture which is ever more hostile to our God and our King, a broader society that increasingly speaks with a voice that is foreign to us.

So yes, there are plenty of people who deny the claims of Christ to be Lord and king. And yes, the enemies of Christ may seem to have the upper hand today. But on the day that the Son of Man returns, on the day that the King divides His sheep from the goats, everyone will bow the knee to Jesus, whether they want to or not.

For on that day, the news will be as good for Jesus' loyal subjects as it is bad for His enemies. For this is how Isaiah describes the peace, the plenty, and the security that await those who are faithful to the One True King: "He will dwell on the heights; his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks; his bread will be given him; his water will be sure" (verse 16). Best of all, the people of God will enjoy the presence of our Lord and of His Christ forever. Isaiah says, "Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar" (verse 17). And Jesus makes a similar promise to those who are faithful to Him, saying that we will hear the most wonderful words of welcome anyone can imagine: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

And so we see that the royal authority of Christ is at the same time a blessing to His people and a curse to those who defy Him. Isaiah explains this contrast using nautical imagery in verses 21 and 23.

To God's people, He is a broad river or stream, bringing the water of life to our thirsty souls. But at the same time, God will not allow His enemies' proud ships to sail where they want to go. Instead, their masts will not stay in place and their sails will not spread out. In short, the same river that will be a blessing to the sheep is a source of frustration to the goats.

And it is right in the middle of this nautical contrast that we oh-so independent Americans find the striking words of verse 22: The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King. And that means that only by submitting to His rightful authority over us can these three truths be good news. For only then can we also say that the Lord will save us.

And that's the bottom line, isn't it? For if we want to be on the good side of Jesus on the day of His coming, we need to be one of His people today, obeying His laws, respecting His judgments and acknowledging His authority today. That's why Isaiah talks in verse 15 about the need for us to be righteous, to speak upright words, to refuse to accept bribes or other dishonest gain. That's why we must not even listen to those who brag of their evil deeds. That's why we must close our eyes to wickedness of all kinds, rejecting the ways of those who oppose King Jesus.

And that's why Jesus says that those who are faithful to Him will inevitably live out that faithfulness in deeds of love and mercy, self-sacrificially helping those who unbelievers consider to be the least important among us. For as we care for all of Jesus' brothers, we are not only declaring our love for them, but also our union with Christ Himself.

But that's just the problem, isn't it? For which of us has truly been consistent in our allegiance to King Jesus? Who among us hasn't abandoned His law at different times, in different parts of our lives? Which one of us can claim that we have been truly righteous in His sight? No, if the enemies of God will get what is coming to them on the great day of the Lord, and if the enemies of God are those who disobey His perfect law of love for Him and for one another, we are all in big trouble, aren't we?

That's why we need King Jesus to do one more thing for us: we need Him not just to subdue our enemies, but to subdue ourselves. We need Him not just to show us our sin and to show us our need for a savior, but to bring our wills into line with His own. In short, we need Him to save us.

Yes, Jesus saves us as our prophet, by shining the light and the truth of God into the darkness of our confusion and sin. Yes, Jesus saves us as our priest, dying the death that our sins deserve, giving us not the wrath we deserve, but the grace we so desperately need. But it is also as our King that Jesus saves us by applying the great work of His salvation directly to our disobedient and defiant hearts. Isaiah puts this so plainly in verse 22: The Lord is our King – He will save us.

And because our King saves all those who trust in Him, because He saves us even in spite of ourselves, all the blessings promised in verse 24 will be ours: those who dwell with Jesus won't be sick with our sins anymore, but will be forgiven our iniquities. Yes, the Lord will consider us to be righteous, not because of what we have done but because of what He has done on our behalf. And thus we are truly free, free to obey His perfect will today, and free to enter into the joy of our Lord forever and ever.

So yes, even we freedom-loving Americans have a king. And yes, He is coming again in glory to separate His sheep from the goats, judging the living and the dead. So, is that good news for you? What will the King say to you on that day?