

What Christ the King Sunday teaches us about exercising power

If Jesus being king doesn't mean that things turn out well for everyone, what *does* it mean?

By [James Sledge](#)

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I've seen a number of Internet memes that are variations on this theme: "No Matter Who Is President, Jesus Is King." I won't argue with the sentiment. This coming Sunday many Christians will celebrate Christ the King, and the phrase "Jesus is Lord" is one of the most ancient and basic Christian faith statements. But what exactly does it mean to say that Jesus is king or lord?

I could add that we Presbyterians, as part of the Reformed-Calvinist family, are really big on the sovereignty of God. No matter how things may seem, God is ultimately in charge, in control. But again the question of exactly what this means and how it works remains.

But back to the Internet memes, it isn't always clear what comfort is to be taken from those posts about Jesus as lord or king. Some seem to imply that we shouldn't worry because whatever happens in this life and this world doesn't matter very much. Others seem to say "Don't worry. Jesus has got this." Perhaps other reassurance is intended. I don't know, but I know I don't much care for either of these two options.

The very fact that Jesus entered into human history, healed those who were sick and hurting, and had compassion for their earthly difficulties shows that God is concerned with history, with plain old, run-of-the-mill human existence. Jesus teaches us to pray that God's will be done here on earth. To say that Jesus is Lord can't possibly mean that earthly events have no real importance.

But if we go to the other end and speak of Jesus' lordship meaning, "Everything will be OK," we have to deal with countless times in history when Jesus' lordship and

God's sovereignty provide no deterrent to unspeakable evil being committed. The Holocaust, millions killed by Stalin, the evils of slavery, and the genocide of Native Americans—that list barely scratches the surface of the horrors humans have committed. That Jesus is Lord or king clearly doesn't mean that things turn out well for everyone. But does this lead us back to option one? I hope we can say something more than, "Life is crappy, and then you die. But then it gets better."

If you look up the Gospel reading for Christ the King Sunday, it features Jesus on the cross. Not exactly most people's image of a king. Surely this idea of a crucified king has to influence our notions of his kingdom, yet I'm not sure that has often been the case. More often we've imagined Jesus as a king who looks little different from earthly ones other than the addition of divine powers. In other words, we've turned him right back into the sort of king some who rejected him 2,000 years ago wanted him to be.

Following similar logic, the church has often been an imitator of human empire and power. Roman Catholics, who've been around since the days of Roman emperors, have buildings and vestments and ecclesiastical structure that would fit right in with an empire. We Protestants, because we've only been around for 500 years or so, have more modern and sometimes democratic trappings of power. We Presbyterians have a somewhat federalist-looking denominational system which springs in part from our theology, but is also about power and control.

In the recent election, evangelicals largely supported Trump, not because he was one of them, but because he was seen as a way back into power. Many liberal Christians are in depression over Trump's election, at least in part because it means a loss of power. Both evangelical and liberal Christians say we follow Jesus, but neither of us is much enamored with his way of exercising power. Neither of us is much inclined to suffer for following Jesus.

I say this in full awareness of my own middle-class, white privilege where it is generally possible to avoid suffering if I choose. I know that is not true for others, and I do not say to people who are oppressed or persecuted to embrace it as the way of Christ. I am speaking to those on the left and the right who relish the power we have and who dread the thought of losing it.

There is a line in the opening constitutional statements of my denomination speaking on the church as the body of Christ that reads, "The Church is to be a

community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life." I think that articulates very well the way of Jesus and what it would mean to have Christ as king and lord. I love the theology it expresses. But on some level, my paycheck is dependent on not living this out. And therein lies the problem.

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