

Readings for November 21, 2021

Ezek 34:11-12, 23-24

¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Daniel 7:13-14

¹³ “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Revelation 1:4b-8

⁴ John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷ “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen. ⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John 18:33-37

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” ³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” ³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” ³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” ³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Jesus as Messiah and Lord

Christ the King Sunday celebrates the *status* that the risen and ascended Jesus has *right now*. He is the true *King* of the world or, as the old graffiti slogan put it, “Jesus *rules*, OK.” The trouble is, we are not sure whether to end that slogan with a question mark or an exclamation mark. I suggest that, in part, it’s because we don’t know what to make of this notion of Jesus as *king*. When many think of Jesus today, they might say he was a teacher and storyteller, a wise man, a healer, a prophet, or a holy man. Christians would also describe him as the good shepherd and the savior of the world, but would hesitate to call him King, as that sounds political - even territorial, as kingship implies a “kingdom.” So where does the basis for Christ the King Sunday come from? We will address that question this morning.

First, let me point out that it is possible to consider all those earlier titles¹ of Jesus somewhat *independently* from the Old Testament. And because of the brutality of Old Testament and its seeming harsh portrayal of God, many want to simply wipe the slate clean and begin again with the story of Jesus. However, a closer look at the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament won’t allow us to do that. The New Testament *only* makes sense in the context of the Old, and that’s certainly the case with the idea that Jesus is now *King*. The very first verse in the New Testament makes the connection; Matthew begins with a genealogy of “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”² In mentioning those names, Matthew is emphasizing to his readers that the birth of Jesus is part of the *ongoing* story of Israel. Furthermore, Matthew starts his gospel by forthrightly stating that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David,³ and those are both *kingly* titles to first-century Jews. Matthew and the other New Testament writers are therefore claiming that Jesus is the *fulfilment* of Jewish expectations, and so we are forced to go back to the Old Testament to make sense of all this.

Once upon a time, we are told there were two people, Adam and Eve, and God made them as his representatives—his *image-bearers*—and wanted them to rule creation wisely and responsibly as shepherds and gardeners who would be accountable to God and follow God’s ways. But they rebelled against God and chose to try and rule independently. In the story, they were evicted from Eden.⁴ God began again with new image-bearers in Noah and, more significantly, with Abraham, and later the nation of Israel.⁵ Through these people, God wanted to be *revealed* and to *bless* the *whole* world.⁶ But as time passed, Israel’s kings increasingly failed to be faithful image-bearers of God; like Adam, they

¹ But *not* the roles of Jesus as shepherd or savior as they firmly link to the Old Testament.

² Matt 1:1. “Messiah” means “Anointed (or Chosen) One.”

³ See [2]. His stress is on both titles, since he repeats twice more “Messiah” (in 1:17, 18) and “son of David” (in 1:21). Mark 1:1 also announces Jesus as Messiah to his readers, and Luke has an *angel* announce that information in Luke 2:11. See also John 1:17, 41 (and 49).

⁴ This aspect of trying to be like God is also a feature of the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1-9). Note: it is the *theological* significance of these stories that is important, *not* their historicity!

⁵ See, for example, Exod 19:4-6 where God speaks of wanting “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” This theme is picked up in Isa 43:21, 61:6; 1 Pet 2:4-10; Rev 1:6.

⁶ See Gen 12:2-3.

also wanted to usurp God's place. Even after the Babylonian exile, the people continued to refuse to be God's light to all the nations. Yet through the voice of the prophets there was *the hope and promise of a new image bearer, a new Davidic king, someone who would be 100% faithful to God, be a blessing to the whole world, rule redemptively in such a way as to ultimately restore a broken creation—including its creatures, by being both a gardener and a shepherd*. Hear, for example, the words of Ezekiel: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: *I myself* will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock . . . so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered."⁷ All the things that the leaders should have done and didn't do, God himself will bring about. God, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, then says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, *my servant David*, and he shall feed them: *he shall feed them* and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."⁸ This royal servant David was widely understood to be the messiah and the New Testament writers universally claim that person is Jesus. Incidentally, that's one reason why the miracle of Jesus feeding the multitudes is significant.⁹ This incident is recorded in all four Gospels, and it not only points to oracles such as this as being fulfilled (literally), but also presents Jesus as a new Moses, a shepherd figure who leads a new exodus toward the kingdom of God.¹⁰

Consequently, first century Jews widely understood the messiah to be God's anointed *king*. However, many thought the messiah would be a political and military savior who would defeat Israel's oppressors and establish a physical kingdom.¹¹ And clearly Jesus did not bring about the kind of liberation the Jewish people had anticipated. And yet all the Gospel writers remain convinced that Jesus was—and is—the long-awaited Messiah, or "Christ" in Greek, a name which—as mentioned earlier—is also associated with the kingly titles, "Son of David" and "King of Israel/of the Jews." They therefore understood Jesus to be *redefining* what messiah means¹² through his teaching and actions, including his death and—crucially—through God raising Jesus from the dead. We can't make sense of the Jesus now ruling as King without first seeing his *whole* life in the context of the broader Old Testament narrative and of the New Testaments writers' perception of Jesus as "fulfilling the scriptures."¹³ For example, Paul goes as far as describing Jesus as a second and last Adam,¹⁴ again making the connection that Jesus is God's true and faithful image-bearer.¹⁵

⁷ Ezek 34:11–12 (NIV), emphasis mine. See also Jer 23:1–3.

⁸ Ezek 34:23–24; see also Ezek 37:24–25; Jer 30:9; Hos 3:5; Isa 11: 1, 10.

⁹ See Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14. And in John 6:35, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

¹⁰ See also Exod 16:1–17:7. The choice of 12 disciples also implies being the 2 ancient, divided, Jewish kingdoms of Israel (North) and Judah (South) together at last. Moreover, non-Jews will be included too.

¹¹ This is evident in the conversation between King Herod and the Magi, where "King of the Jews" and "Messiah" seem to be used interchangeably; Matt 2:1–8.

¹² And divinely authorized to do so in the account of Jesus' baptism, Mark 1:10–11; Matt 3:16–18; Luke 3:21–22.

¹³ This is a feature of his persuasive rhetoric to help convince skeptical Jews that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah—see Matt 2:6, 15–18, 23; 3:3; 8:17; 11:10; 12:17–21; 15:7–9; 21:4–5, 42; 27:9–10.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 15:45–49; Rom 5:14–19. See also Col 1:15–20; Phil 2:6–11; Heb 1:1–4; 2 Cor 3:18–4:6.

¹⁵ It is too easy in the individualism of today for us to do an "Adam" and usurp God's rightful place.

Those Old Testament connections were important for Jews, but what about *non-Jews*? How did the early church convince them that Jesus was now King? This is where another title comes important, namely the proclamation that “Jesus is *Lord*.”¹⁶ The Greek word for “Lord” (*kyrios*) has multiple meanings. For example, it’s used as a title of respect, like “sir” in English, and as a synonym for “master,” as in someone with authority over others, such as a slave-owner.¹⁷ The same Greek word was also commonly used for the Roman Emperor.¹⁸ Therefore for a non-Jew to claim Jesus as Lord was provocative because it implied Caesar was *not*.¹⁹ (This explains why Christians would not participate in what was seen as their civic duty and worship local idols, including those that honored the emperor.) Now, despite the multiple meanings of Lord, the implied meaning can often be deduced from its context.²⁰ What is interesting, as we will see in a moment, is to see how Peter and Paul use the word “Lord” in their preaching and letters to non-Jews. After all, they’re using Lord in the context of *a post-resurrection and ascended Jesus*, and they see him as the one worthy of prime loyalty and worship.²¹ Moreover, the titles the early church use for Jesus reveals how they, upon reflection, came to understand the *identity* of Jesus.²²

Luke presents Peter’s first sermon in Acts 2 and it concludes with his identification of Jesus as *Lord and Messiah*.²³ Paul writes to the Corinthians, “We don’t proclaim ourselves, but *Jesus the Messiah as Lord*.”²⁴ The writer of the book of Revelation says of Jesus that he is “*the Messiah, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*.”²⁵ Taken altogether, to call Jesus “Lord” means that he is the one who has absolute authority; he is the King who has our allegiance and loyalty. In fact, Matthew begins with “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David”²⁶ and concludes his Gospel by reporting Jesus as saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . .”²⁷ and that

¹⁶ See 1 Cor 12:3 where Paul mentions “Jesus is Lord” in the context of an authentic Spirit-inspired confessional statement.

¹⁷ *Kyrios* can also mean the head of the household (cf. lord of the manor), a guardian, or a god or goddess.

¹⁸ Moreover, and not insignificantly, the widely read Greek LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the texts Christians call the Old Testament) uses *kyrios* for God’s personal name, YHWH. Consequently, using this term with reference to Jesus raises the issue of patriotism for Romans and blasphemy for Jews.

¹⁹ Some caution is needed as it is unclear how overt or anti-establishment (i.e., the imperial cult) this statement was.

²⁰ At other times it is ambiguous; perhaps this is deliberate by the gospel writers. . .

²¹ Various New Testament writers make it clear that Jesus is actually worthy of *worship*—which is blasphemous for Jews, for God alone is praiseworthy (see Matt 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38). This practice came about because of the early church’s belief in the resurrection and in the implications of that event for the identity of Jesus in relation to God the Father.

²² See also Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know: Reflections on the Identity of Jesus* (Wipf & Stock, 2021).

²³ Acts 2:36. (See also [18]; Jews of the diaspora present in Jerusalem for the festivities would understand his point.) Peter also tells the story of Jesus in the context of the story of Israel – the Old Testament – and Davidic kingship. This is also true of Luke’s summaries of Peter’s other sermons in Acts, see Acts 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:34-43.) See also 1 Pet 3:15. Note too that Luke 2:11 has an angelic messenger announce Jesus’ identity to the shepherds as “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

²⁴ 2 Cor 4:5. See also 1 Cor 1:2; 8:6 and [16]. He also writes to those in Rome, “If you profess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). See also Rom 10:12, 14:19 (1Tim 1:2).

²⁵ Rev 1:5. The last three titles for Jesus are ones he never used to describe himself and therefore show how the early church was continuing to develop its understanding the significance of Jesus after his death and resurrection. And in Rev 17:4 (& 19:16) it says: “[Jesus,] The Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings” (see also 1 Tim 6:5).

²⁶ Matt 1:1.

²⁷ Matt 28:18 and then he gives the great commission.

being the case, Jesus is even worthy of our *worship*. All the New Testament writers would agree that the simplest creed was “Jesus is Lord,” and that applied to both Jews and non-Jews. And building on those other meanings of the Greek word “*kyrios*,” to claim “Jesus as Lord” also means acknowledging that he is the absolute and undisputed *owner* of our lives, and we are his servants or, put a different way, he is the *master*, and we are his life-long disciples.

We don’t find it easy to say “Jesus is Lord” today, do we? We would rather be the “master of our own destiny and the captain of our soul.”²⁸ Let’s not kid ourselves, it wasn’t easy to say “Jesus is Lord” in the 1st century either. Christianity was a minority religion, and many New Testament letters were written to encourage believers to stand firm when facing economic, religious, and physical opposition. John the Seer, who wrote the book of Revelation, knew the reality of those challenges his readers faced yet he proclaimed the risen and ascended Jesus as “the King of kings and Lord of lords,”²⁹ even when it looked like Caesar was indestructible. I suggest one reason we find the notion of Jesus’ lordship so hard to accept or understand is because we assume a king who comes in *power*, not in *love*. Then as now, Jesus is not a tyrant, he is a lover whose love is so potent that death will not defeat it. Pontius Pilate was also confused by that in our gospel reading. Christ’s kingdom is *for this world* but not *of this world*, in that it will not be realized by a usual show of brute force. We have to therefore hold on *in faith* that *Jesus is indeed king*, and all the others are mere pretenders who will one day be exposed as emperors with no clothes. That will take place when the curtain between our domain and God’s is finally drawn back, then every eye shall see him, and the true Lord of History is revealed for all to see. This image is very hard for many to accept today because we live in a world that’s dominated by “what you see is what you get.” Our enlightened and scientific age leaves little room for a belief in the “One who is, who was, and who is to come.” That is the choice we make in committing ourselves to the Jesus story, and accepting by faith that things are *not* what they seem. . .

Christ the King Sunday is a good day to ask ourselves, “Who is Jesus *to me*?” We can agree that he was a teacher and storyteller, a wise man, a healer, and a prophet. Muslims and those of other faiths would also agree. The question is do we believe that God has handed over his authority to Jesus the Son, as Matthew says, or that Jesus is now the King of kings and the Lord of lords, as the writer of Revelation says? If we agree, then we have grasped the good news of the New Testament. It also means we have made the connection with the Old Testament hopes and expectations of a coming messiah and have recognized that Jesus is that Messiah. It means that we have recognised, along with Thomas, that Jesus is “my Lord and my God.”³⁰ And more than that, we understand that we have been given the Holy Spirit and invited and empowered to be God’s new image-bearers to *our* generation. Will we, like Jesus, commit to be faithful in that task?³¹ That is our mission, should we choose to accept it.

²⁸ See the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley (1849–1903), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>.

²⁹ See Rev 17:14; 19:11-16 and 1 Tim 6:15.

³⁰ John 20: 28. (This is the climax of John’s Gospel.)

³¹ See [16].

Finally, although “Jesus is Lord” is the simplest creed, I want to conclude with another confessional hymn, or creed, from Philippians, one that summarises who Jesus is and what God achieved through him, and one that was written *before* the Gospels.

Messiah Jesus, who though he existed in the form of God
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave,
by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature.
He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!
As a result, *God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*
so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow
—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.³²

Amen. Let us pray.

³² Phil 2:6–11 (NET).