

Christ the King in a Secular, Post-Christian World

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 22, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Luke 23:33-43.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

It was the custom in those days, when a criminal was executed, to publicly announce his crime by an inscription fixed to the top of the cross, a brief description of the charge. Bystanders would read the charges brought against the executed person. So Jesus had an inscription nailed to his cross. The inscription read: *This is the King of the Jews*. The accusation brought against Jesus was that he claimed to be king. Caesar could not tolerate any challenge to his authority.

Some ancient Greek manuscripts add that the inscription was written in three languages: in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Why three languages? For one thing, so everybody could read the charges brought against Jesus. During the Passover season Jerusalem was packed with Jews from all over the Roman Empire. Pilate wanted all these people to know why Jesus was crucified as a warning to anyone who would challenge Caesar's authority. But I believe there's another reason why three languages proclaimed that Jesus was king. I believe the hand of God was in it. Greek, Latin, and Hebrew were the three great languages of the world. Greek was the language of culture; Latin, of politics; and Hebrew, of religion. God wants us to proclaim that Jesus is king in the area of culture, politics and religion.

The inscription was written in Greek - *This is the King of the Jews*. Greek was the language of culture. Down through the ages the Greeks had been known for their culture. When Alexander the Great set out to conquer the world hundreds of years before he told Aristotle that his ambition was to make all people, everywhere, Greeks. Wherever Alexander conquered - in Syria, in Egypt, in Persia, and in distant India - he sowed the seeds of Greek culture. Greek was the language of poetry and literature: of Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. Greek was the language of philosophy: of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Greek was the language of science: of Pythagoras and Euclid and Archimedes. And even today, the modern world owes a debt of gratitude to Greek culture, Greek was the language of culture.

And it was written on the cross in Greek - *This is the king of the Jews*. In other words, God wants Jesus Christ proclaimed as king in the sphere of culture. In the years following the crucifixion, the followers of Christ conquered culture for Christ. One ancient writer claimed that Christians out-thought their pagan neighbors. Philosophers like St. Athanasius and St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, interacted with pagan philosophers and proclaimed Christ as king in the area of philosophy. Christian artists, poets, sculptures, and scientists used their intellectual gifts to conquered culture for Christ. They didn't retreat into their own little religious world. They claimed culture for Christ.

Christians today have largely abandoned culture. Our culture has been described as a vast wasteland. Christians have become mass consumers of our post-Christian, wasteland culture. The consumer culture has changed and molded us but we've done virtually nothing to claim the culture for Christ. Christians have become incredibly anti-intellectual. We take pride in our anti-intellectualism. We take pride in our cultural ignorance. I'm amazed that so many ~~ministers take pride in the fact that that they're not intellectuals.~~ They read virtually nothing but religious books that confirm their own religious beliefs. Christians have largely abandoned culture wholesale to nihilists, atheists and agnostics. Few of us are proclaiming Christ as king in the realm of culture anymore. Earlier this century T.S. Eliot did. C.S. Lewis did. And the modern novelists John Updike and Andrew Greeley are committed Christians whose oftentimes risqué novels point people to the vacuity of life without Christ. But most Christians chose to be influenced by our culture without influencing it for Christ.

I'm greatly encouraged by members of our church who engage the culture for Christ through their commitment to quality education: Jan Townsend is on the school board. Nancy Andress and Dick Winchester have been on the school board. Many of you are school teachers committed to quality education. Some of you attend public meetings and express your concerns about education. But what if more Christians insisted on academic excellence in our public schools? What if we turned off the tv and read poetry and great literature to our children? What if we encouraged them intellectually to use their minds to proclaim Christ as king in the realm of

culture? In our Post-Christian world the really dangerous foe Christianity faces is not Islam or Communism but godless consumerism and ignorance.

And the inscription was written on the cross in Latin - *This is the king of the Jews*. Latin was the language of politics. The Romans sent their legions marching out to conquer the world and bring all nations under Roman law. The ancient Romans stood for law and order and government. They had such a genius for law and government that every system of law in the Western world is still based on Roman law. Latin was the language of politics.

And it was written on the cross in Latin - *This is the King of the Jews*. In other words, Jesus was claiming the realm of politics for his own. Wherever Christians have proclaimed Jesus as king in the realm of politics tyrants have been brought down. In Scotland. In America. In South Africa. In Romania. If Christ is king then neither nation nor earthly ruler can claim ultimate allegiance. I take great encouragement in the fact that some of our church members serve on the borough council, Jim Sumner and John Ware. Others are active in party politics and some have run for office. But many Christians, today, have abandoned politics. Many don't even vote. We don't know what the issues are. We're influenced more by emotional rhetoric than a rational understanding of the issues. Politics is dirty we say. But what if committed Christians became involved in politics, at least by voting, if not by running for office. I'm not advocating attempting to impose Christian belief and lifestyle on other people. I'm talking about a love for justice that seeks the welfare of the whole community. What if Christians gave at least as much money for the work of Christ's kingdom as we pay taxes?

And the inscription was written on the cross in Hebrew - *This is the king of the Jews*. Hebrew was the language of religion. It was the language of the Law of God. It was the language of the prophets. In other words, Jesus is proclaimed king in the realm of religion. Christians do not put Christ on the same level as other religious leaders. I don't believe that all religions are equally true or good any more than I believe that all political systems are equally good. We're not saved by religion. We're saved by Christ crucified and risen from the dead.

Christians must not proclaim a vague religiosity. We must renounce all other religious authorities and confess Christ alone as king. We proclaim Christ as king in the area of religion.

In the second hymn we sang,

O ye heights of heaven adore Him;
Angel hosts, His praises sing;
Powers, dominions, bow before Him,
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore!

Christians must, once again, proclaim that Jesus is king in the area of religion.

On this Sunday the church focuses on Christ the king. God wants Christians to proclaim Christ as king in the realm of culture, of politics and of religion. American Christians aren't too comfortable with Christ as King. We like Christ as personal savior but not as king. We want a Christ who forgives and heals and comforts but not a king who commands obedience. We want Christ the miracle worker but not a crucified Palestinian Jew who identifies in his death with sinful criminals and whose power is revealed in weakness and suffering. For most American's the *self* is king. "Who are you to tell me what to believe? I'll decide for myself. Who are you to tell me what is right and wrong? I'll decide for myself." Most Americans are committed to the kingdom of *self* rather than the kingdom of Christ, including an alarming number of Christians.

I would like to suggest that if you have not been recognizing Jesus as the ultimate authority in your life that you do so now in your own words in the privacy of your own heart. If there are areas of your life that you're holding back - the way you use your mind, your use of money, the way you vote, the way you treat others confess it to Jesus our King. Ask him to forgive and enable you to proclaim and live for him as King in every area of life.

Righteous God, you have crowned Jesus Christ as Lord of all. We confess that we have not bowed before him, and are slow to acknowledge his rule. We give allegiance to the powers of this world, and fail to be governed by justice and love. In your mercy, forgive us. Raise us to acclaim him as ruler of all, that we may be loyal ambassadors, obeying the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ.