

Before the church ever realized it should worship him as Christ the King, the disciples asked Jesus the rabbi to teach them to pray.

His surprising and simple and memorable response is what we know call the Lord's Prayer, which includes that dangerously hopeful phrase, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

We pray this, of course, because there is such a wide and wild difference between what happens in heaven and what happens here.

No one sensed this divergence more deeply than John.

John was a pastor exiled on the island of Patmos, a prisoner of the Roman empire for the heinous crime of public Christianity.

Surrounded by ocean and separated from his people, John had a vision of heaven which he shared in a long letter back home that we now read as the biblical book of Revelation.

His vision of heaven looked a lot different than the view out his window.

There were saints and angels instead of soldiers and guards, and the sea was crystal, making it not only the more beautiful, but also calm and steady and safe enough to cross.

The one in charge was not punishing Christians but welcoming and celebrating them, not killing them but filling them with life and joy and song.

John brings greetings to his faraway friends from Christ this King, and in doing so he names him with three titles, quite possibly the shortest and most profound three-point sermon ever.

John first names him *the faithful witness*, and the word *witness* in Greek is *martyr*.

He is the one who stayed faithful to God even unto his death at the hands of the Romans, exactly like too many of his followers in John's community after him.

Is it any surprise that the empire that killed our king is killing us?

Immediately following this comes a second title, *the firstborn of the dead*.

Is there any doubt that those who follow Jesus in death will also follow him into the new birth of resurrection?

John sees their faces, full of life and song, in heaven as it is not on earth, and that crazy and beautiful hope gives him the audacity to ascribe the third and final title: *the ruler of the kings of the earth*.

This is shameless plagiarism; it is the exact title rendered unto Caesar, the emperor responsible for John's exile and the deaths of his most faithful friends, the one who makes the decisions on earth as it is not in heaven.

Of course this is also treason, to suggest that anyone else is God almighty than Caesar himself, let alone a criminal executed by Rome as a political impostor, the so-called *King of the Jews*, a phrase so damning of both him and his people that Pilate had it hung in three different languages on his cross.

That cross, of course, is the signature image of the kingdom on earth in which John lives and writes and worries, a kingdom of muscle and violence, bent on control and drunk with brute force as the power of choice, like so many kingdoms and regimes before and after, so often including our own.

But in Christ John sees something radically and beautifully different, a power so strong and compelling it needs no bloodshed but endures it without retaliation.

The one who dies is not the vanquished enemy but the victorious king himself, and his red blood spilling from his pierced side washes robes a dazzling white.

This is the one who greets his people as *the faithful martyr, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*, titles so rich and palpable and personal that the people back home unscrolling his greeting cannot help but see Jesus in one another's faces, and see those faces lost to imperial murder forever safe and found in the face of Jesus.

But who is this Jesus, this Christ the king, for us?

We who are now the legally protected citizens of today's empire, who know nothing experiential about the unchecked tyranny of kings having sworn it off more than two centuries ago, we who have complete freedom not to live our faith because we have no threat of dying for it, how do we see and understand who Jesus is for us?

What three titles would we ascribe to Jesus; what would we inscribe on his business card or his Facebook page or the sign on his cross?

Instead of a crown of thorns, what would we force upon his bleeding head?

How do we identify him?

It is a question that those of us at Resurrection who have participated this fall in vision meetings have considered, and I am looking forward to reading the printed answers that will return.

We have wrestled with this because, as John understood, we can't know who we are called to be until we know who he is; it is his identity that determines ours.

For those who did not participate in these conversations, and even still for those who have (and who no doubt gave profound and insightful responses), the question lingers, never fully answered, because Christ our king is always so much more, more even than king, more than male, more than powerful, more than royal...and often being more by being what appears at first look to be much less.

This is the king who slept in a manger and the righteous, innocent man who died on a cross.

This is the humble, homeless rabbi who taught with an authority no one else had, with images and ideas and conversations that still stretch and perplex us millennia later.

*This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guards and angels sing;*

who was, who is, who is to come, the martyr and the ruler, the dead and buried and born, in that backward order.

Or is it we that have the order backward?

Maybe we should pray *thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, instead of quietly hoping for the other way around.

Maybe violence is really the absence of power and the signature of cowardice and insecurity.

Maybe true power is the ability to stand powerless and explain to the judge that I live by different laws governing a kingdom that is not from here, which is why no one is fighting to keep me from being handed over.

We celebrate Christ as king because he wields a power no one else does...the power to die rather than fight, the power to forgive and heal and reconcile and save, the power not to end life with death but to end death with life.

He wields the power to take the tired old familiar title and transform it into a completely new job description.

He stands on trial before Pilate, but he turns the questions until it isn't really clear who is judging whom, which one of them is interrogating the other, as two kingdoms meet in a dance so awkward that it completely exposes their wild difference.

And John of Patmos, who sees that difference so clearly and feels it so acutely, continues his

telling of the vision in chapters to come by describing the announcement in heaven of the imminent appearance of Christ the King.

Excitement builds as the buzz begins that he is coming.

He is not introduced as a human king, however, but as the king of the jungle, the mighty Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Suddenly, the Lion appears...as a tiny slaughtered lamb.

Heaven goes wild with thunderous praise for a bloody baby sheep who is the Lion King.

It is a picture so stunning we can only wonder at it, marvel at it or mock it, dream it or doubt it.

Except that we also have royal orders to pray for it.

*Thy will be done, O Lord, in all its strangeness and beauty.*

*Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.*