

## Wednesday - No Kings

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Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, "If you are Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf." But Jesus replied, "Scripture says:

*Human beings live not on bread alone.*

Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, "I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me, for me to give it to anyone I choose. Do homage, then, to me, and it shall all be yours." But Jesus answered him, "Scripture says:

*You must do homage to the Lord your God, him alone you must serve.*

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The devil is not discouraged by Jesus' resistance to his first temptation - there are other tricks in his bag. Next he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world at once, and offers them to Jesus. What an opportunity! How many times have each of us thought, "If only I were President (or King, or Queen) - I'd run things differently, and there would be peace in the world and people would have enough to eat and be treated fairly." Here is Jesus' chance to do just that - and with perfect knowledge and wisdom, Jesus would do it right - he would make no mistakes.

Jesus turns it down flat. Our first clue as to why comes straight from the devil's mouth: "I will give you all this power and ... splendour, for it has been handed over to me ..." The kingdoms of the world belong to the devil.

Now this is a truth we embrace in part, and firmly deny in part. We are all ready to agree that that kingdom over there - the one we are not on top of - is evil. From the perspective of the United States, the Third Reich was evil, the USSR was evil, the Sandanistas were evil, Fidel Castro is evil. It is harder to accept that our own kingdoms, the ones we participate in and benefit from, also belong to the devil.

How can this be? All the kingdoms of the world, including our own, belong to the devil because they concentrate power: first to do what is properly God's work, and eventually they accumulate power for power's sake. As Lord Acton observed, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The preamble to the Constitution of the United States gives the following reasons for a centralized national government:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

To establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty: Yahweh's work. The reason that the kingdoms of the world belong to the devil is that their best and highest

purpose is to do work that is properly left to Yahweh - they are evidence that the people no longer place their faith in Yahweh. Over time, they gather more and more power to themselves and build an ever-higher, ever-steeper pyramid, all in the name of doing work best left to Yahweh. When asked how much money was enough, Nelson Rockefeller is reported to have said, "Just a little more." When confronted with the question of how much power is enough, the kingdoms of the world respond, "Just a little more."

So Jesus responds to the offer of becoming king of the world with a quote from Deuteronomy, this time from Chapter 6:

...be careful you do not forget Yahweh who has brought you out of Egypt, out of the place of slave-labour. Yahweh your God is the one you must fear, him alone you must serve, his is the name by which you must swear.

The experience of the Israelites is that the premier kingdom of the known world - Egypt - was for them a place of slave labour. Yahweh extracted them from this kingdom and established them as a chosen people, a loose confederation of tribes with primary loyalty to Yahweh. Their struggle has been to resist the temptation to install their own king, to become just like all the other peoples around them. They have given in to this temptation, and the results have been disastrous. Now the devil offers one last chance to get it right.

When Yahweh leads the people out of Egypt, they are leaving the model of centralized power: Pharaoh is both god and king, the supreme authority. In contrast, Yahweh tells the people they are to have no king, and symbolizes this by the ark of the covenant - in which the Judgement Seat is empty! There is no one on the throne, no human king, because their total allegiance is to be given to Yahweh.

The decentralization of the Israelite government is symbolized by the account of the crossing of the River Jordan recorded in the Book of Joshua, Chapter 3. The priests carried the ark of the covenant ahead of the people, and as soon as their feet touched the waters, the river separated. The upstream water stood still and the downstream water flowed on its way, leaving a dry path for the people all the way across. When the people were all across, Yahweh told Joshua to choose one man from each tribe to go to the place in mid-river where the priests were now standing with the ark, and to have each one take a stone from mid-river and carry them to the camp. These stones are to be a reminder of the way that Yahweh separated the river and allowed the Israelites to pass - as this whole episode is a reminder of the parting of the Red Sea as they left Egypt. Furthermore, the 12 stones are a symbol that they are the 12 tribes of Israel - not a centralized government but a decentralized people. They will be guided by Judges, not kings, until the people can no longer bear being different.

The first major Israelite flirtation to monarchy is reported in the Book of Judges - and that experience alone should have been enough to warn them away from kings. After Gideon's great victories in the territories beyond the Jordan River, the Israelites wanted him to rule them and to establish a royal house. Gideon refused, saying "I will not rule you, neither will my son. Yahweh will rule you."

Gideon's son Abimelech could not resist the temptation to make himself king, and after murdering 70 of his brothers, seized power - for about three years. Abimelech's youngest brother Jotham hid himself and escaped from the massacre. Going to the top of Mount Carmel, Jotham tells the gathered people a fable about a time when the trees decided to select a king to rule over them:

Hear me, leaders of Shechem so that God may also hear you!

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One day the trees went out  
to anoint a king to rule them.

They said to the olive tree, "Be our king!"

The olive tree replied

"Must I forgo my oil  
which gives honor to gods and men,  
to stand and sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the fig tree,

"You come and be our king!"

The fig tree replied,

"Must I forgo my sweetness,  
forgo my excellent fruit,  
to go and sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the vine,

"You come and be our king!"

The vine replied,

Must I forgo my wine  
which cheers gods and men,  
to go and sway over the trees?"

Then the trees all said to the thorn bush,

You come and be our king!"

And the thorn bush replied to the trees,

"If you are anointing me in good faith to be your king,

come and shelter in my shade

But, if not, fire will come out of the thorn bush

and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

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This is apparently the oldest parable in the Bible that uses plants or animals to make a moral point about human behavior in the style of the Aesop's fables. The olive and fig trees, along with the grape vine, are the basis of life and culture in the Biblical culture. The story is telling us that the worthy, valuable trees all have their own role in the order of things - in the gospel order, we might say - and being king is not part of that role. The only one willing to be king is the thorn bush, who plays no positive role in the culture - and even the thorn bush warns that choosing him to be king could be very dangerous, indeed.

The monarchy of Abimelech was dangerous and bloody for the Israelites, and not just for his close relations - you can read the gory details in Judges. After this brief interlude, however, the Israelites went back to the system of judges - including, among others, Samson and eventually Samuel.

Samuel was a prophet and a judge over Israel throughout his life. When he grew old, however, the people of Israel asked for a king to rule over them, "like other nations". Despite his personal reservations about this, Samuel prayed to Yahweh, who responded,

Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you: it is not you they have rejected, but me, not wishing me to reign over them any more. They are now doing to you exactly what they have done to me since the day I brought them out of Egypt until now, deserting me and serving other gods. So, do what they ask; only, you must give them a solemn warning, and must tell them what the king who is to reign over them will do.

Everything that Yahweh had said, Samuel then repeated to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "This is what the king who is to reign over you will do. He will take your sons and direct them to his chariotry and cavalry, and they will run in front of his chariot. He will use them as leaders of a thousand and leaders of fifty; he will make them plough his fields and gather in his harvest and make his weapons of war and the gear for his chariots. He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, your vineyards and your olive groves and give them to his officials. He will take the best of your servants, men and women, of your oxen and your donkeys, and make them work for him. He will tithe your flocks, and you

yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry aloud because of the king you have chosen for yourselves, but on that day Yahweh will not hear you.

The people, however, refused to listen to Samuel. They said, "No! We are determined to have a king, so that we can be like the other nations, with our own king to rule us and lead us and fight our battles.

Samuel speaks very clearly about two consequences of choosing to have a national government - a monarchy rather than a theocracy. The first consequence is that the people will suffer. The king will take away the sons of families and put them in his military; he will put the young men of the nations to work increasing his own wealth and his power to protect that wealth from anyone who threatens it. The king will take away the daughters of families and put them to work making his own life more luxurious. He will take the harvests and the livestock and the very fields and vineyards away from the people until they become his slaves. The king will become richer and richer, more and more powerful; and the people will pay the price. The Israelites have personal experience confirming these predictions: Samuel could easily be describing their history in Egypt and the effects of Joseph's work on Pharaoh's behalf.

A king does not do this because he is a bad person, but because he is a king. Solomon is the prime example of a good and great king; when he died, the whole assembly of Israel spoke to his son of the "cruel yoke" Solomon had laid on them, a heavy yoke of cruel slavery imposed on them. In spite of Samuel's warnings, which were to come tragically true, the people insist: they want a king.

A kingship is a power system: an institutionalized hierarchy of power. Samuel is not engaging in a comparative political science lecture - he is talking of the consequences of instituting any power system - any institutionalized hierarchy of power - whether it be an absolute monarchy, a republic, or a representative democracy/federal government of the type we have in the United States. Samuel is not differentiating between those governments which are established for "good" reasons and those which are established as the result of raw power grabs.

The reason Samuel does not make these distinctions is that they are not very important. No matter how or why a power system is established, or what form it takes outwardly, a power system imposes its will on people in order to attain certain objectives. Having chosen to attain its objectives through the use of power, a power system will always determine that it could do a better job if it had a little more power. As it accumulates power in order to accomplish its objectives, the institution perceives real or imagined threats to its existence, and accumulates more power in order to protect itself. Eventually its own protection comes to replace the original objectives as the primary activity of the power system, and it accumulates more and more resources in order to protect itself better and better.

The second consequence of choosing to have a king is Yahweh's reaction to the choice. Yahweh tells Samuel exactly what the Israelites are doing by choosing to be ruled by a king:

They are now doing ... exactly what they have done to me since the day I brought them out of Egypt until now, deserting me and serving other gods.

This is how seriously Yahweh takes this business of kings and power systems: choosing them is the same as deserting Yahweh to serve other gods. If that is not clear enough, Yahweh says exactly what will happen as a result of choosing to have a king:

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you will cry aloud because of the king you have chosen for yourselves, but on that day Yahweh will not hear you.

You will cry aloud, but Yahweh will not hear you. Wait a minute - this is Yahweh who heard the Israelites in Egypt when they weren't even crying to Yahweh, and who cared for them so greatly that nothing less than liberating them from their oppression would do. Now Yahweh tells these same folks that if they go choose a king instead of depending on Yahweh, even if they cry directly to Yahweh about the consequences of their choice, Yahweh will not hear them. Yahweh will deliberately not be listening on that day.

To choose a human king, to give power and allegiance to human systems of power rather than to Yahweh, is so destructive of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and human beings that Yahweh will not listen to our complaints about how badly our choice has turned out. Isaiah also speaks of Yahweh's refusal to listen to the prayers of those whose hands are dirtied with social injustice. The prophet Micah catalogs the many sins of the princes of the House of Israel against the people - actual sins, not just anticipated ones - and then says this:

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Then they will call to Yahweh,

but he will not answer them.

When the time comes he will hide his face from them

because of the crimes they have committed.

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The royalty have inflicted dire suffering on the people, as Micah has just cataloged; and Yahweh will hide his face from them because of their crimes. Samuel says that kingship is itself a social injustice, and that the sin does not belong to the rulers alone: the people share in that sin by choosing to be ruled by a king rather than Yahweh

Samuel is saying that the Israelites have chosen to forget how to be non-Egyptian: they want to be just like all the other nations, participating in the systems of hierarchy. They have chosen a human king, a human power system, in place of Yahweh. They just couldn't bear to let the Judgement Seat on the Ark to stay empty; they had to put somebody in it.

Jesus' teaching and example continued and confirmed Yahweh's condemnation of systems and institutions of power. The early church understood this, suffering persecution and even death rather than support the imperial government by participating in its armies, until 313 AD. Then the church made a deal with Emperor Constantine, and the church itself became part of the imperial hierarchy - with disastrous results for the ministry of the church.

The only sign of hope in all this is that Yahweh does not refuse to listen forever, but only "on that day." My sense of the meaning of this limitation is that as we understand how much we have erred by participating in the power system, and begin to extract ourselves

from that system, Yahweh will again listen and be reconciled to us, and intervene to help us. Isaiah reports that this is indeed Yahweh's desire and intent, in a passage spanning parts of chapters 57 and 58:

For I do not want to be forever accusing  
nor always to be angry,  
or the spirit would fail under my onslaught,  
the souls that I myself have made.

...

I saw how he behaved, but I shall heal him,  
I shall lead him, fill him with consolation,  
him and those who mourn for him,  
bringing praise to their lips.

Peace, peace to far and near, Yahweh says,  
and I shall heal him.

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A few verses later, Yahweh tells us what will restore the covenant, what it will take for Yahweh to listen to us again:

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Is this not the sort of fast that pleases me:

to break unjust fetters,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke.

to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break all yokes?

Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,  
and sheltering the homeless poor;  
if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own kin?

Then your light will blaze out like the dawn

and your wound be quickly healed over.

Saving justice for you will go ahead

and Yahweh's glory will come behind you.

Then you will call for help and Yahweh will answer;

you will call and he will say, "I am here."

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Jesus rejects power for himself in the desert, and teaches his disciples to pray for Yahweh's kingdom, not a human one. Repeatedly, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, and contrasts that kingdom with the flawed, imperfect nature of even the best of human kingships.

It is the nature of kings that I can be the servant of only one. The authorities who brought Jesus to Pilate understood that, because they began their accusation by saying that they had found Jesus claiming to be ... a king. Pontius Pilate understood that, because he put the question to Jesus directly: "Are you the king of the Jews?" The chief priests understood that, because they said, "We have no king except Caesar." Jesus' claims for the Reign of God were sufficient to get him executed. You and I have largely forgotten this, or we spiritualize God's kingdom, and pretend we can serve both Yahweh and the kingdoms of this world. No one can have two masters.

Yahweh did not give Israel a thorn bush to be their king. In David and Solomon the Israelites got just about the best father-son royal succession one could hope for. Yet in spite of a brief flurry of glory, the long-term legacy of the House of David was disastrous for Israel. If these two couldn't get it right, who could? Perhaps the Christ, God Incarnate - but Jesus turns the job down flat. It is not that the people who have been king were flawed (though they all have been, on every throne in every nation) - it is that the kingship itself, the system of hierarchy and accumulation of power, is no more a part of the Reign of God than the silo. No silos, and no kings in the Reign of God.