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Sermon: *Liturgical Seasons*



Jesus and leadership

On Christ the King Sunday, the church is called to resist the same temptation that faced Christ, the temptation to adopt the leadership strategy of Herod, says Ken Carter.

by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#)

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Editor's note: Faith & Leadership offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. This sermon was preached Nov. 22, 2009, Christ the King Sunday, at Providence United Methodist Church, Charlotte, N.C.

[John 18:33-37](#)

Today we bring the Christian year to a conclusion. In the church's calendar, Christ the King is the parallel of the Super Bowl trophy or the Final Four in college basketball or the last game of the World Series. This is what everything had been moving toward. In baseball, for example, there is spring training, the opening pitch of the season, the first games, the long summer, the end-of-year stretch, the playoffs. It all leads, for someone, to the World Series.

In the Christian year, it begins with Advent, preparation for the birth of Jesus; and then the celebration of his birth at Christmas, and then his appearances -- to the wise men, at the wedding, in the transfiguration at Epiphany -- and then he sets his face toward Jerusalem and we are plunged into the days of Lent, suffering, sacrifice and self-denial, the betrayal and death of holy week, the silence of Holy Saturday, but then the miracle of resurrection at Easter, and the prayer, over 50 days, for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

And then the church moves through ordinary time, and we are called to reflect on the Kingdom of God in everyday life, but all of it moving toward the conclusion. You can see it in the imagery of the Book of Revelation, or the way our hymnal is ordered at the end: death and eternal life, the communion of the saints, the return and reign of the Lord, the completion of the Creation (the City of God).

Christ the King Sunday is about the Lordship of Christ. In the words of the Revelation to John, he is the "ruler of the kings of the earth." And yet there is a clear distinction in the passage from the Gospel of John between the rule or reign of the leaders and God's vision. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus says. Jesus *did* come upon the earth to establish a kingdom. It is just not what we were

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expecting.

To understand the kingdom language of Jesus, we have to know something about his context and the leadership structure of that day, and this had everything to do with another leader, King Herod. Herod died the year Jesus was born. Jesus was born in a cave in an out of the way town named Bethlehem. Herod was buried about three miles east of Bethlehem in a massive mountain fort, the Herodium. Jesus' birth, despite the significance we attach to it, was a quiet affair. Herod's burial was just the opposite; he literally had a mountain constructed in the flat desert. He wanted people to think of him and revere him long after he had died -- in fact, you can see the Herodium all the way from Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. The Herodium is impressive, and a few people visit there, but not like the crowds that flow into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Herod's life is well known in outline -- his 10 wives, his suspicion that his favorite wife was unfaithful (he had her murdered), his murder of three of his sons. He gave instructions that on the day of his death Jewish elders from a number of villages were to be killed simultaneously -- this way lamentation would be heard across Israel (this was, mercifully, not carried out). He hears of the birth of Jesus and orders the massacre of the innocents, which sent Mary, Joseph and their newly born child, Jesus, into Egypt.

Herod was a powerful leader. His architectural influence is still present in Israel: he built the city of Caesarea on the coast, near Tel Aviv; he built Masada, and, most curiously, he rebuilt the Temple. A portion of that temple survives today: the Wailing Wall, or the Western Wall. These are massive structures. Herod ruled for 34 years. He was not a religious man, but he could use religion for his own purposes. Everything -- sports, art, architecture, shrines, palaces -- all of it was for the purpose of consolidating Herod's power and leadership and establishing his legacy.

Jesus was born into the kingdom of Herod. Herod was a very effective leader. But Jesus quickly realized that his way of leadership would not be Herod's. "My kingdom," he says to Pilate, "is not of this world." The temptation of Jesus, of course, would have been to model his techniques, his methods after Herod, but with a different outcome and goal. This was the temptation of Matthew 4 and Luke 4. The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain, and shows Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and says, 'All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'"

The temptation of Jesus was to adopt the leadership strategy of Herod. In his book "The Jesus Way," Eugene Peterson writes:

"So why didn't Jesus learn from Herod? Why didn't Jesus take Herod as his mentor in getting on in the world? In the world into which Jesus was born, no one has done this kingdom thing better. It's true that Herod was not interested in God, but everything else was intact. All Jesus had to do was adopt and then adapt Herod's political style, his skills, his tested principles and put them to work under the rule of God."

The temptation of Jesus, which he rejected, must also have been the temptation of his disciples, for Jesus gave them a clear teaching about an alternative vision of leadership:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44)

So, on Christ the King Sunday we think about Jesus. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, he says at the close of Matthew's gospel. And Paul writing to the Philippians, says: "Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:11).

To follow Jesus is to profess him as Lord. This is the basic Christian conviction and creed. To believe that he is Lord of all is to honor and glorify him, above all else, and above all other rulers and authorities. He came upon this earth to establish the Kingdom of God, an alternative to the kingdom of Herod. He spoke not of the love of power but the power of love. And he clearly gave his presence, his spirit, his authority, to his disciples, to spread his influence, his teachings, his goodness upon this earth until he comes again. And so on Christ the King Sunday, the readings from Scripture and the hymns associated with this day not only magnify the Lord, they call upon us to be a part of establishing the kingdom of God upon the earth.

We are tempted toward two errors in this kingdom work. One is to despair, to give up -- we pray, every Sunday, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," and yet sometimes it seems that not much changes, and so we are tempted to be passive, to throw rocks at an evil world, to dismiss those we judge to be unworthy of salvaging. A second temptation is to use the world's methods to accomplish a good result -- to believe that the end justifies the means. And so we are tempted to use Herod's power to achieve Jesus' intentions.

Jesus rejected both of these ways -- to give up or to compromise. If we are doing the *work* of Jesus, we do it in the *way* of Jesus. And so leadership in the way of Jesus is always servant leadership. Why? Because any power that comes to us comes as a gift. I love the comment by Malcolm Gladwell in his book "Outliers": "success is grounded in a web of advantage and inheritance, some deserved and some earned, some just plain lucky, but all critical to making [us] who we are."

Jesus lays down his life, and the power comes to him as a gift from God -- he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, Paul writes, therefore God has highly exalted him. The self-emptying life of Jesus is a life given for others.

How do we at a practical level connect Jesus and our leadership? Every person here, in some way, is in a sphere of influence or a position of leadership.

Two comments along the way have been helpful to me. One was a statement by someone at the Center for Creative Leadership. Pam and I served in Greensboro [where the CCL is located] for nine years, and several staff persons were members of our church. One was talking about leadership with a group and said one day, almost as an aside:

"If you do *not* think you can change your organization, you will use your power for your own personal gain.

"If you *do* think you can change your organization, you will use your power for the common good."

Herod used his power for his own personal gain.

Jesus used his power for the common good.

Another friend over breakfast was talking to me, years ago. He had heard, through the grapevine, that I might be invited to assume a leadership role. He had recently retired, and he knew from experience what he was talking about. He said, "Ken, in this role you will have a lot of power, and you will find that, the less you use it, the more you will have."

I actually did not end up in that position -- for which I am grateful -- but I have remembered the wisdom. The gentiles, in their positions of authority, lord it over those "beneath" them, but it shall not be so for you. Whoever is greatest must be your servant.

And so the whole Christian story moves toward a climax, just as our lives do. It is not about being great, it is about serving. A month ago I mentioned Churchill's saying: "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

On Christ the King Sunday we discover the Lord not enthroned in the heavens but, in the Gospel (Matthew 25) that is read in alternate years on this Sunday, welcoming the stranger, visiting the imprisoned and the sick, feeding the hungry.

Christ the King is the moment toward which the whole Christian story has been moving -- the adoration of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. And yet in our end is our beginning. Next Sunday we will begin the journey of waiting and preparing for the fulfillment of God's promise, the miraculous gift at Bethlehem. With the seekers who went to find him, and with those who stand at the great judgment, the kingdom is surely coming, but always comes in ways that startle and surprise us. As we hear in "Amahl and the Night Visitors" by Gian Carlo Menotti:

"The child we seek doesn't need our gold
On love, love alone he will build his kingdom
His pierced hand will hold no scepter

His haloed head will wear no crown
His might will not be built on your toil
Swifter than lightning He will soon walk among us.
He will bring new life and receive our death,
And the keys to his city belong to the poor.”

Pastor's note: I was particularly indebted in this sermon to Eugene Peterson's "The Jesus Way" for the reflection on Herod. He also covers this material in an earlier series of lectures, "Follow the Leader."