

Ancient conflicts continue to mark our world. If you know where to look, you see evidence of them everywhere. You can take a nice day trip from Tallahassee and inspect the earthworks of a Confederate fort that was built for a battle that never came. And if you make the trip to the Old World, you can see evidence that is, well, older. From the Hadrian's Wall to the ramp that Roman soldiers built in the Judean desert to capture the mountaintop fortress of Masada, the lengths civilizations go to in order to defend and attack are monumental. But you can also easily miss them. I'm reminded of our own country's astonishing investments in offensive and defensive capabilities, like the famous defense listening complex built within Cheyenne Mountain. The Confederate fort is in one corner of Suwannee River State Park that people can skip and still have a pleasant visit. People cross Hadrian's Wall by train and motorway every day, often without realizing it. If you ascend Masada the way I did, hiking up the original access route, the aptly named "snake path," you won't see the Roman ramp until you get to the top and look down the opposite side.

The evidence of a different sort of ancient conflict also looms large in scripture, but once you know to look for it, you see it all over the place. Centuries before the Roman conquest of Judea, a controversy roiled among the Israelites, over a deceptively simple question: should Israel have a king, or not? Both sides had compelling arguments. The monarchists would point out that Israel was not only God's chosen people, but also God's holy nation. If they were holy to God, then they had to be a great nation, and every great nation has a king. Their opponents could say that the whole point of being chosen by God is to be different from the rest of the world. They could point out that the Book of Judges, which tells the story of Israel's first years in the Promised Land, describes the system God intended Israel to have, and as the book's name indicates, that system has a different sort of human leader with no place for a king, because Israel's king is God himself, and what could be better than that?

You can read the Biblical history of Israel as the nation pestering God for a human king, until God finally gives in, saying something like, "Oh, so you think you want a king? Well, careful what you wish for." And raising up the handsome but unstable Saul as their first human monarch. Then things seemed to be going better in Project Monarchy, with David and Solomon representing something like "the good old days," combining successful political governance with religious faithfulness and integrity. Because far from our concept of the separation of church and state, the whole point of having a holy nation is upholding its religious essence.

And then some of the kings of Israel missed the point. By the time the prophet Jeremiah wrote the verses of our first reading, kings of Israel had gotten soft on paganism, allowed it to become dominant, then restored worship of God, then allowed paganism again, and part of the country had been conquered by pagans, and while our reading from Jeremiah ends on a note of hope that the remaining king, Zedekiah, might sort things out, Jeremiah himself had already fled to Egypt.

Jeremiah was talking about what happened in his lifetime. When he talks about “shepherds,” he’s using a common expression in the ancient Middle East that refers to kings. And he’s savage in condemning kings who were supposed to uphold Israel’s religious integrity, its very identity, but instead did the opposite, which of course brought disastrous consequences.

Jeremiah sets a fine example for us, though. On the one hand, he holds rulers to high standards, and fearlessly calls out their moral bankruptcy and blatant dereliction of duty. On the other, he reminds us that human leaders aren’t everything. Despite all the trouble they cause, God matters more, God is more powerful, and although God made the nation take the consequences of being led astray, God never stopped loving them, and was already active in reuniting them to their homeland and even more importantly, to reuniting them to God.

Later interpreters would take the closing verses to mean something else. “I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Some would take this to mean not that Jeremiah was optimistic about the new king in his own day, but that at some point in the future, God would send Israel an ideal human king, better even than David and Solomon. Others thought that God would somehow step into the royal role and rule the kingdom directly.

Jeremiah’s approach to monarchy should inform us today. We tend to put way too much emphasis on human rulers. We make excuses for some and demonize others, as if nothing were more important than securing power for “our side” and denying it to “the enemy.” But while quality leadership is absolutely important, we struggle to identify the best candidates and put them into positions of power. Occasionally there will be a political leader we genuinely admire, but I know I usually see my votes as disappointing compromises, not enthusiastic endorsements.

So it’s no wonder that many people struggle with the very idea of celebrating Jesus as a king. If we aren’t historians, we might not be able to name many kings that we know much of anything about. Americans can probably name the current British King, Charles III, and might remember King George from a history class (or a YouTube video) as the bad guy from the American Revolution, but while King George might have been a convenient villain figure, he didn’t have much political power. But we still compare Jesus to what we think an earthly king to be, with the gaps in our image filled in by other sorts of leaders we’re more familiar with.

That approach is utterly backwards, of course. Far better to move forward in Jeremiah’s tradition and consider Jesus as the standard by which all earthly rulers should be measured, for Jesus is God’s elegant resolution to the ancient problem of kingship. Since Jesus is both fully God and fully human, Jesus squares the circle of the ancient debate on kingship: he is both the ideal human king *and* God ruling directly. Jesus is a perfect king not only because of his divinity, but also because of his humility

and his mercy.

Jesus lived humbly, poor on the brink of destitution, and died in the lowest possible state, stripped of even his clothing. He also rejected calls to assume military leadership and allowed himself to be handed over to the Roman army. So the standard for judging earthly rulers should not be how much might or pomp they can muster, but how merciful they are, how much they care for the most vulnerable in their realms, and how they use the resources God has entrusted to them. Jesus's kingship is shown chiefly in his compassion, mercy, and grace. And we shouldn't be surprised that God's rule is superior to humanity.

As the condemned man traditionally called the Good Thief pointed out, Jesus was being killed by humanity, brutally, despite having done nothing wrong. Even then, even there, on the cross, Jesus continues his ministry, revealing his kingship in the exercise of mercy, for only kings could grant pardons. Although the Good Thief said he deserved death, Jesus grants him eternal life, forgiving him even though he did not express remorse for whatever crime had gotten him there. Jesus himself, even the most limited relationship with him, is sufficient to overcome all our sins. Earthly rulers, typically stingy with pardons, don't even try to compare.

While we do not have the Godly powers of healing, feeding, and forgiveness as Jesus, those gifts are still available to humanity because he continues to exercise them. When we meet people in need of healing, feeding, and forgiveness, that is, when we meet people, we can give them the chance to connect with Jesus by inviting them to join his body, the Church.

Our king does not ask for material tribute, for all things already belong to him. Nor does the prince of peace ask for tribute in the form of military service, for he already has an army of angels at his command. Rather, he asks for the tribute of humble and open hearts, like that of the Good Thief who simply asked Jesus to remember him.

But we don't have to be crucified to come face to face with Jesus and receive his grace. We come face to face with him every Sunday, when he returns under the forms of bread and wine. So please, when you meet people who do not already have a faith community, invite them to your weekly audience with our merciful and loving king. You will be inviting them to two loving communities: the congregation of Advent Church, and Paradise itself.

Ancient conflicts may linger on earth, but the Ancient of Days has provided us with the one king who can overcome them all, revealing the glory of grace for all to see, and opening the way for all to enter into God's kingdom of light and peace.