

Title: A Strange Sort of King

Text: Revelation 1:4-8, John 18:28-38

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Last Saturday, I revisited my roots and watched the Ohio State/Michigan football game. As the fourth quarter began, the Buckeyes (that's the team from Ohio, for non-football folks) were clinging, somewhat desperately, to a small lead. The Michigan team had clawed its way back into a game that was all OSU in the first half. As OSU took the field in the final quarter, the announcer said of the OSU quarterback, "Now is when he makes his legacy. All of his previous work has come to this, the fourth quarter of this game. No one remembers the losing quarterback. If he wants to be remembered as an elite athlete, he must win here."

We really like it when our leaders are victorious in battle. We praise the quarterback who can captain better, the linebacker who can tackle harder, the running back who can power through a defense. Incidentally, those are all things that OSU players did last week, and OSU alums did like it.

On the other hand, we don't like it when our leaders lose in battle. We either forget them, as that announcer said we would do to the losing quarterback, or we look down on them. Whether you agree with President Bush's Iraq War policy or not, you can probably agree that the majority of Americans don't like it, and he and his party paid the price for it in the last election. And why? When the war started, the US was 60-40 for the war. Now, the numbers have reversed. Why have 20% of Americans turned on this war? Did 20% of the American populace suddenly develop a problem with defying the UN? Did they begin to feel uncomfortable with the pre-emptive war doctrine? Maybe, but I doubt it. I think that we just started to believe that we were losing, and Americans don't like losing. We like winning, and we like people who win.

And because of this, because we like winners, and we dislike losers, today's Revelation reading is quite appealing. It is appealing because it shows Jesus as a winner – someone who will overpower the opposition with a show of force. Often in passages like this one, the language is so archaic and often-used that it is tough to get the real meaning. So let's break it down:

- "Grace and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come."¹ This is a greeting, and like other greetings found in New Testament letters,² this greeting also comes in the name of a particular God, and it gives us our first look at the characteristics of that God. God is indestructible. God is eternal. We can count on God to always be there.
- "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins."³ Not only is God huge and powerful. God loves us and has acted for us in history to free us.
- "The ruler of kings on earth."⁴ Think of the most powerful people you know. The people who appear to control your life. The people you wish you could be, but know you

¹ Revelation 1:4

² Galatians 1:4,

³ Revelation 1:5

⁴ Revelation 1:5

never will be. Jesus is to those people what you think they are to you. He is the real ruler of all the people who you think have no ruler. They may not know it yet, but they will someday.

- “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.”⁵ This all powerful one is coming and he is going to show everyone. All the people who mocked him. All the people who mocked you because of him, they are going to realize their mistake.

In Revelation 1, Jesus is the indestructible, eternal, King of everything (even other kings). He loves us and is willing and able to save us and destroy those that threaten us. Jesus is the ultimate winner. So, of course people like that passage, and of course it gets read so much – it tells people that they are winners, because their leader is a winner.

This passage and others like it show Jesus as victorious and God as triumphing over all creation and drawing all things to himself. And they are keys to our understanding God and Jesus. However, they comprise only one side of the coin. On the other side of that coin, the Bible also records a whole range of teachings and images which point to Jesus as a servant.

- You have Jesus washing the disciple’s feet.⁶ Foot washing was considered a very low task – you can imagine that before central sewers and clear separations between livestock paths and human foot paths, feet got pretty dirty. Cleaning feet involved dust and dung and sweat and smell. It was not fun.
- You have Jesus calling himself the good shepherd⁷ – the person whose life is in service to others. The one who will risk his safety in order to save one lost sheep.
- You have Jesus helping people right and left – even a few people who at first he didn’t want to heal, but on their insistence, he agreed to heal.⁸
- And you have certainly the most powerful image of Jesus’ servanthood—the crucifixion.⁹

So, we have two pictures here – one of triumphant king and the other as lowly and humble servant. And we, as Christians, have to get these two together. We have to deal with the fact that our leader was captured, condemned, tortured, and killed. We have to wrap our minds around the tension found in the fact that the one we call Lord – the most powerful being in the universe, the thing through which the universe was made, the very order of the universe – that one was killed by the likes of us. And unless we do that, we do not understand the gospel.

When we take either the resurrected Lord or the crucified Christ without the other, we end up with a distorted view of what God is about. When we focus too much on the crucified Christ, we end up with a tragic and hopeless story of a good man dying a pointless death – another admirable but ultimately useless victim of the power structure of this world. The world is unchanged, except that another victim has fallen prey to its unstoppable system. If we focus too

⁵ Revelation 1:7

⁶ John 13

⁷ John 10

⁸ The examples are too numerous to list here. The examples of times when Jesus appeared reluctant to heal but did so anyway include: Matthew 15: 21-18, Mark 7:24-30, John 2:1-11

⁹ Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19

much on the resurrected Lord, we risk translating that same violent power structure to another plain of reality, without changing the nature of the structure itself. Jesus becomes just like any other Lord – with the same tendencies to oppress those who disagree with him, the same desires to consolidate his power, the same ruthless, death-dealing, favoritism. The only difference is that this Lord likes us and hates them, instead of the other way around.

The first Jesus is a victim of the system of power, and does not change the system at all. The second Jesus simply rearranges the chairs on the sinking ship of oppressive power. No, somehow Christ's death and Christ's kingship are connected, and within that connection lies a truth that revolutionizes our understanding of power and leadership.

I think that the truth can be summed up in this term: servant leadership. Hear the teachings of Jesus to his disciples about this new leadership:

- “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹⁰
- “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹
- Another time, Jesus was walking with his disciples in Capernaum. “When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”¹²

Power is traditionally thought of as the ability to make someone else do something that they do not want to do. Kings and military leaders are defined by their power to make others do what they want. But Jesus was not that kind of King. Jesus' difference was rooted in the source and expression of his power. Instead of making people do what he wanted, through physical, economic or political coercion, he invited them into a life that was different and then let them decide. He preached a world where the hungry have food, the homeless have a place to live, the depressed can dance, and the sorrowful lift their voices in praise. And then, he let people make their own choices. And sometimes they chose well, and sometimes they chose terribly.

The servant kingship for which Jesus strove is so radically different from what the world of Jesus' time thought of as kingship that it understandably was confusing to people. Even his own disciples had difficulty with it. But Jesus kept on living and preaching this servant leadership even as he was taken away to be executed. And still his disciples struggled. How can our leader be going off to die? When confronted with Temple guards arresting his Lord, even Peter, the

¹⁰ Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, Luke 22:25-30

¹¹ Matthew 18:3-4

¹² Mark 9:33-35

most trusted disciple, broke rank. He pulled out his sword and shed blood to defend Jesus. And how does Jesus reply? “Put your sword away. All who draw the sword will die by the sword.”¹³

We like a winner – we like a dominating king – one that is going to dominate others, that is. Because we like to win ourselves. We have sacrificed to get where we are, and we believe others should have to sacrifice to get up here too. But, the model of servant leadership which Jesus provides is completely opposite this idea. His model lifts up sacrificing for others, rather than making others sacrifice. Regardless of how we have come into a position of power, we have attained our positions so that we might be of service to others who have less power. This is a complete flip of how we normally think of leadership.

One more thing, and then I’m done. All this talk about servanthood can make us nervous. It sounds like being made to do something by a more powerful person. It sounds like being taken advantage of. It sounds a lot like losing. But that just shows how much the world’s notion of power and leadership are ingrained in our minds. Let’s go back to that John passage – the one that shows Jesus at his most humble stage – where he has none of the power, or at least where he appears to have none of the power. Notice in the passage who should have the power, and who ends up appearing powerful.

Pilate should have the most power. He is the ruling Roman in Jerusalem – the actor of the Emperor. But look at his actions. He spends this whole story running back and forth between the Jews and Jesus trying to negotiate a ceasefire. And he ends up having no real say of his own – he looks sort of pitiful. And why is he so weak here? Because Pilate is subject to the whims of the people who he governs. In the Pax Romana, anyone who did not succeed in maintaining the Peace (Pax) was in trouble. If Pilate had allowed the Jews to rise up against Rome, his job (and maybe his life) would be at risk. Thus, to some extent, he needs the Jews to be happy (or at least quiet) subjects in order to get a satisfactory job review. This is why even though he is supposed to be the judge, as the passage proceeds, it becomes less clear whether he is judging or trying to keep from being judged.

After Pilate, the Jewish leadership should have the most power. But, if you read a little earlier, you find a meeting of the Sanhedrin, where they talk of their fear that a few insurrectionist Jews would cause Rome to increase its violent oppression of Judea. In that meeting, one stands and says that it is better to offer up one man to save the nation.¹⁴ The Jewish leadership is so worried about offending and threatening the Roman government that they are willing to kill one of their own to save the rest – the exact opposite of the good shepherd, who will leave the 99 in order to save the one.¹⁵ So, they are not in control either.

In fact, no one is in control of themselves – no one is the determiner of their own destiny. Except Jesus, who as the passage goes on, looks and sounds more and more the king, more and more the ruler, more and more the judge. He is not driven by a desire for power over others, a power which must be fought for, consolidated, and guarded. Instead, he is interested in power

¹³ Matthew 26:52. In John’s account, Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away, but for a different reason: because Jesus must do God’s will, even if this is it – John 18:11.

¹⁴ John 11:49-50

¹⁵ Matthew 18, Luke 15

rooted in loving others. Ironically, is for this reason that he is able to best serve God and others, even when it means doing things that others don't want him to do, and even when it means doing things that will cause him to suffer.

You see, for John, this is the picture of leadership – love which is not deterred by suffering. One commentary notes: “a king enthroned by being lifted up on the cross is a peculiar kind of king. He is a king who rules not by sheer force (as did the Romans) but by suffering love.”¹⁶ A servant and a King. Leadership through service.

And we are to be the body of Christ today. We are to serve out of love. One theologian notes that the church is at its best when it is not concerned with bringing people in so that they can become members and it is instead concerned with serving others.¹⁷ I couldn't agree more. Let us strive to be that kind of church, one that follows the example set for us. Amen.

¹⁶ Kysar, Robert. *Preaching John*. (Augsburg Fortress, 2002) p. 145.

¹⁷ Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis: repainting the Christians Faith*. (Zondervan, 2005). p 167.