Every Sunday we pray “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We do it because it is in the Lord’s Prayer, but what would that mean if it really happened? That God’s will was done on earth as in heaven? Scripture and tradition see Jesus in the roles of prophet, priest and king. On this “Christ the King” Sunday, in our liturgical year, we may wonder what “king” means when applied to Jesus? A king is not something familiar to our culture. Leaders of our government have no corresponding role. Their role is really more like servant-leadership; they are voted in or out as we choose. Elvis is still the King right? In the Elvis Presley museum in Tupelo, a letter about the re-release of his music in China when China re-opened after years of seclusion says the mass people there could identify only three names from Western culture – Jesus, Elvis and Nixon. King? Elvis is as close as we get.

In the Biblical narrative, David is Israel’s iconic king, the prototype – even archetypal – king. Israel had its identity invested in the Davidic kingship. Part of what I love about scripture, though, is that it doesn’t whitewash the story or clean up the plot. All the ambiguity and untidiness is still there. And we have two problems with the Davidic kingship.

The first problem is that Israel had any king at all. If you remember the tale, God didn’t want to give them one and said so through the prophet Samuel, when the people asked Samuel to anoint them one. Had Israel forgotten that they had escaped from a royal despot down in Egypt, barely sneaking out with their lives? What irony, that these now-free people were demanding a king! The whole point of the Exodus and the Covenant at Sinai was that God was king, therefore not Pharaoh and not anybody else. (In our Book of Confessions, the Barmen Declaration asserts this for our time, written in defiance of Nazi Germany.) The prophet told them “No” at first, but they whined mightily to the Lord, “Everybody else has one…” An earthly king was an unfortunate compromise. (Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian realists of the 20th century may have sympathized.)

The second problem with David as the icon, the archetypal King, was David himself. Scripture treats David in Messianic terms. He figures large not just because of who he was but because of what he did. David had a Messianic identity. The only problem was, David was a mess, and maybe not a damnedmess only because in the end he was a redeemed mess. His private and public life were not separate, not in those times. On the one hand he was a great military and political leader who strengthened Israel into a then-modern nation, while on the other hand his reign was riddled with intrigue, abuse of power, civil war, an ego-driven administration, adultery and murder. If people read the Old Testament as much as the newspaper, the foibles of General Petraeus are, by comparison, boring.

David was more mess than Messiah. God didn’t cause all the events in David’s life, but must have labored overtime to work with him. The faithful are not innocent, just forgiven. While he was not indispensable, scripture still calls him the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite, the exalted. The text from 2 Samuel tells us why. David’s last words, he said, were not his, but the Spirit’s words speaking through him. He knew all gifts come from God, and showed little pride in his last words, only gratitude. He knew, in that moment, the source of any strength and any value he had. He knew his kingship was a stewardship, a gift, not to be
held in an iron fist, but loosely. The one who rules with that spirit sees justice and mercy like sunlight and rain, our text says, growth for the created world and for us. God's character, not David's, were the foundation of all he had: “Is not my house like this with God?” Humans make contracts and break them. God makes covenants and keeps them.

History is replete with the work of bad kings/emperors/shahs/fuehrer’s/whatever…destroying and enslaving. But in God’s kingdom might does not make right, justice and mercy do. And that is where Jesus comes into history, hailed as the Messiah, the new Davidic king. Recall the genealogies in both Ruth and Matthew, which shows the lineage where he could claim the role on earthly grounds. Instead, Jesus up-ended the definition of what a king was.

John, in our text from Revelation, paints a grand vision of what that rule of the returning Christ would be like. He did so for a church under persecution from Rome from an emperor who looked more like what they were used to. John had the view from the balcony. Down below, things were dangerous. From the lofty vision John painted, salvation had arrived and we were only waiting for the house lights to come on. Christ was already “ruler of the kings of the earth” (new language in scripture to that point), because of his resurrection was “the first-born of the dead, the fulcrum for all of God’s purposes. God is at the start and the end of history (Alpha and Omega), said John. To praise God requires withholding praise from lesser gods (the Roman Emperor or the Deputy Sherriff in charge of Asia Minor). The new rule under Christ would be one of hope and promise.

Jesus himself didn’t talk the same grand and expansive way as John about the kingdom of God, but said it was like a mustard seed, lost treasure, a wedding banquet, generous wages in the vineyard, loving your neighbor as yourself – ordinary and everyday graces, not the view from the balcony! Nor did he seem to claim or desire the grand titles that the Revelator ascribed to him. The kingdom was about life as we live it faithfully. Theology Prof Shirley Guthrie wrote, “The truth we seek … is not our truth but God’s truth. It is the truth that exposes, judges and corrects the limitations and fallibility of us Christians and our religion as well as those of other people and their religion.”

Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world,” and had already told his disciples what the kingdom of God was supposed to be like. How do we come to that on this Christ the King Sunday? In our Presbyterian constitution there is really only one required question for entrance into membership of a Presbyterian church. You hear it repeated often – every time we ordain Elders or Pastors, or install officers. You have answered it yourself. “Who is your Lord and Savior?” And we say …. “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” The “Lord” part of that is probably what it means for Jesus to be not only ruler of the earth, but our king. Lord and savior. We’re better at the Savior part. Perhaps because we all need saving from something, regularly, and are glad of divine help. The Lord part requires more of us, to live with some responsibilities and obligations to a higher power than our own desires.

Frederick Buechner writes: “Insofar as here and now, now and then, God’s kingly will is done in various odd ways among us, even at this very moment, the Kingdom is already here. Insofar as all the ways to do God’s will at this moment are half-baked and half-hearted, the Kingdom is still a long way off – a hell of a long way off, to be more precise and theological.” What would it mean for Christ to be enthroned not just in heaven, but in Birmingham? I cringe a bit as I say that, because I have always had a deep aversion to the
billboards that boast, “Christ is Lord Over (your town’s name here).” I read that and I feel like quoting Inigo Montoya in the *The Princess Bride*: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” The faithful are still beset by an empire of sorts, with no one person behind it – rather it is commercialism that makes us greedy, narrow, and self-centered, a constant media barrage that deforms our thinking and our hearts, an overload that makes us less human. I remember sitting in Havana with Hector Mendez, pastor of the largest Presbyterian and Reformed church in the city. Many of his church members had fled to the US in the Cuban revolution, but there in the 1990’s they were growing again. He was lamenting the fact that most of his flock who had emigrated to Florida had fallen away from the church. He said, “It is very, very hard to be a Christian in Cuba. It must be much harder in the United States.”

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall recently issued a challenge to the churches of our society. His fear is that we are all becoming irrelevant and of little use to God or the world God loves. He deplors the “evangelical, biblicist, fundamentalist takeover of Biblical and theological language,” but says the established churches have to admit we have become shallow. There is deep need, he says, among people “waiting for gospel”, waiting for “something more than novelty and hype… of Christians who are still of a mind to turn the sad immensity of human need into a proselytizing system…” But it is not enough to say what we are *not*. We have to take the log out of our own eye. Hall believes we have failed on two fronts – “1) the substitution of moral or ethical counsel for gospel; and 2) the neglect of personal life in favor of the public sphere.”

We can say “Christ is Lord” on this Christ the King Sunday, but when we have said fine words and sung grand hymns, and the last echoes of our praise dies away, the world still waits – with its troubles and poverty and debts, car accidents and robberies and murders, with its waiting for lab reports to come back, with its hunger and its death. If Christ is enthroned in Birmingham, where’s the evidence of that?

It starts in our own hearts, minds and lives – yours and mine. That is where the evidence must be before it can be anywhere else. It will have to first be “evidence of things unseen,” as it says in Hebrews. And it matter how we live, personally. To follow the way of Jesus that he described as the Kingdom of God. To take up our cross and serve others, but also to be filled with a Spirit that Jesus sent to be our comforter and “Advocate.” Christ the King Sunday is about world where Jesus Christ has redefined the reality of all space and time. No matter what it may look like at any given time, we have this gospel, and have it to share – God is in charge and has the last word. God acts in history. God is not done yet, not with the world and not with us. Holiness is leaking into our reality, invading and changing our world, because Christ IS Lord of all the earth, and our Lord too.

If heaven and earth are really separate things, if they do not eventually intersect, there is no gospel for us here. But if they *do*, then heaven’s victory is ours as well. The gospel is now and it is yours. Let Christ be Lord in your heart, so that no despair may find purchase there. Let wonder be in your world, and live as if the victory is won, because it is. And in the end, maybe soon, all will be well. All will be well. Thanks be to you, O Christ.