

Week 30
April 12, 2009

The King and His Court

Matthew 26:29, 26:53, 26:64, 27:11, 29, 28, 45, 51, 28:6, 28:18

Growing up in a lumber and mill town along the Columbia River in Western Washington, it was fifty miles to the nearest minor league baseball team in Portland and a hundred miles to Tacoma and Seattle. So softball was king. Not old man slow-pitch like some of us play, but fast-pitch. There was an old, rugged field at the local YMCA, where the smell of hot dogs and beer permeated the experience and local legends grew large in the minds of little boys – and even girls. Taverns and union halls sponsored the teams, which were named after their sponsors – AWPPW 580 (American Wood Pulp and Paper Workers Chapter 580) and Twin City Tavern come to mind as well as Bruscos Tugboat, which was a perennial state champion. Many summer nights meant riding our stingrays to the park to watch these giants and heroes try to hit that windmill pitcher. The slap of the softball in the catcher's mitt lands on my senses today with the force of the smell of hot dogs and beer.

The biggest thrill was the annual visit of the King and His Court. Eddie Feigner, the legendary softball pitcher, would come to town with only a catcher, two infielders and one outfielder – to challenge the local all-star team. Then he'd launch us into hysterics by striking people out blindfolded, from second base, through his legs, behind his back, standing backward with a mirror facing home plate; I don't know, standing on his head?

Occasionally batters would get a hit or a base on balls, so the King would go back to the mound, sizzle a few risers or drops or curves over the plate and retire the side. And these weren't flunkies like the Washington Generals that the Harlem Globetrotters embarrassed every night. These were tough, athletic, proud all-stars who hated the thought of the King making them look silly. Still, he would.

As a kid in the grandstands, gnawing on a red rope, I'd snicker, "Do we know who we're talkin' about here? This is the King and his court." Always and finally, I knew who would win. "This is the king!"

For the last seven months we've been studying every verse in Matthew's gospel that introduces the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven and Jesus as the king. Today, we look at the verses in the Easter story that remind us who we're talkin' about. They declare Jesus' kingdom credentials and prepare us for life now and forever as citizens of God's kingdom.

First, we see Jesus around the table with his apprentices. They're celebrating Passover. Jesus brings new meaning to the bread and the cup. The bread is his body, given as a sacrifice. The cup is his blood, poured out for our forgiveness. Then he says, "I won't drink wine with you again until we drink together around the banquet table in my Father's kingdom." What a claim! What a picture. Do we know who we're talkin' about here?

Next, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying. Soldiers come to arrest Jesus, with Judas as his betrayer. Peter vehemently objects. Jesus says, “Don’t you know that I could call a legion of angels?” Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here?

Then Jesus stands before the high priest. With a tone licking with scorn, the cleric asks, “Are you the anointed one?” Jesus answers, “Yes, and one day you will see me sitting on the right hand of God’s throne and coming on the clouds of heaven.” As if to say, “You think you have authority?” Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here?

Now they take him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. He really doesn’t want to deal with Jesus. His wife has had bad feelings about this holy man and Pilate just wants to keep the peace.

“Are you really the king of the Jews?”

“Yes,” Jesus answers. In John’s gospel he adds, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Whoa! Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here?

Now it’s the soldiers’ turn to think they have authority. After whipping Jesus with an awful scourge, they put a purple robe of royalty on Jesus’ mangled flesh. They pound a crown of terrible thorns onto his head and put a scepter in his hands. When they crucify him, they think they’re being ironic. “If you’re the king, save yourself!” And they pound a sign into the vertical beam, “The King of the Jews.” The irony is thicker than they realize. Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here?

Jesus breathes his last after pleading mercy for his own abusers. The sky goes black, the earth shakes and shivers, the stones crack and crumble and the lines between life and death are rubbed away. “Surely this was the Son of God,” says the Roman commander. He knew who we’re talkin’ about here.

Finally, Jesus rises from the dead. The crowning touch. The ultimate statement. “Not even death. Not soldiers or priests, procurators or nature itself ... not even death has authority over me.”

Matthew’s gospel closes with a parting word from Jesus, the risen king. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here?

Our proneness, or course, is to minimize Jesus. If we can paint him as merely a spiritual renewal figure, then we can enjoy his inspiring words without submitting to his authority. If we color him as only a political reformer, then we can borrow from his convictions without submitting to his authority. Even if we can shrink him down to being nothing more than savior of our souls, then we can enjoy forgiveness and confidence before a gracious God without having to submit to his authority. Honestly, we love any good philosophy or religion that betters us some or betters our lives, at least until it makes a claim of real authority over us.

But here’s the problem. Do we know who we’re talkin’ about here? Jesus keeps telling us that he’s the king over all reality in heaven and on earth. If he is, then the implications are staggering.

After telling us, ultimately, that all authority is his, Jesus says, “Now go. Make apprentices in every nation. Immerse them in me and teach them to obey, apply, practice, and actually do the things I’ve been teaching. “

“And I’m with you all the way.”

If all of this is true ... hello! There is no casual way to respond to this that feels anything but silly.

I'm guilty of minimizing Jesus and stiff-arming his authority in my life and in this life. But today, I choose to believe and declare and honor Jesus as king of heaven and earth and the ruler of my life and destiny. I can't do less because I believe I know who we're talkin' about here.

I hope you believe. I hope you know. I hope you don't minimize this ... or him.