

## The Shepherd-King

Jeremiah 23:1-6

*Reign of Christ Sunday/ 20<sup>th</sup> November 2022*

Several years ago, when I was on sabbatical, I was invited to participate in a seminar on the Christian roots of psychoanalysis. Our small group gathered in Rome and met daily in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew, situated on an island in the Tiber River; it's a church built on the ruins of a temple to Asclepius, the god of healing and dreams. One morning we were given a private tour of one of the Vatican museums, which is often closed to visitors.

The Museo Pio Cristiano houses artifacts from pre-Christian Greco-Roman culture and early Christianity from the church's first three centuries. The museum is an archeological treasure trove of statues, carvings, inscriptions, monuments, and sarcophagi, pre-Christian and Christian. The pieces are arranged chronologically so that you move first through the aisles of the Greco-Roman, pre-Christian world, and then you make a turn to enter the Christian world, to the early decades of the church. Standing at the place of the turn, marking the turn, is a stunning statue of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus, dressed as a shepherd, is standing and carrying a sheep on his shoulders, wrapped around his neck. The statue dates from around 300 CE, but it's placed there intentionally by the museum curators to make the important point that with the coming of Jesus, a significant shift – or turn – occurred in how we understand God, how we relate to God, how God relates to us and sees us.

The significance of this shift might get lost on us as we probably take the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd for granted. It's a familiar image for us, especially if we grew up in the church. If we went on a scavenger hunt in our buildings, I know we could find in old church school curricula from over the decades (old flannel boards?) of Jesus surrounded by sheep. I'm sure we would find pictures or books depicting Jesus in pastoral scenes, with white flowing robes, tending to sheep, perhaps holding a shepherd's crook. They're often idyllic, as if from another age. While familiar for some, the image of the shepherd might be difficult to relate to for many since we are so far removed these days from pastoral settings and farms and fields.



The image might have more power or regain some of its power; however, if we place the image of the shepherd caring for his sheep within the context of the brutality and violence of the Roman Empire. In an empire that celebrated and valued strength, brute force, and dominance, that maintained peace through the tip of a sword, that made no space for the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable, Christians placed the image of Jesus as shepherd at the center of their worship life was radical and subversive. Not only was Jesus the Good Shepherd, but this Good Shepherd was also King, who wielded a power that Caesar would never understand. A Shepherd-King who could not be defeated even by the cross of the empire. A Shepherd-King who came announcing the kingdom or realm or reign or, a better translation, *empire*, not of Caesar, but of the empire of God. A

Shepherd-King who demonstrates a still more excellent way of being alive (1 Cor. 12:31), who embodies a power that undermines *every* earthly power, a power that might even look weak and foolish and scandalous in the eyes of the world, the redemptive power of love and peace and compassion.

It's the image of Jesus as Shepherd that captured the imagination of the early Church. There was undoubtedly good precedence for this within Judaism. "The LORD [Yahweh] is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (Ps. 23:1-3). This psalm of David was written by someone who was actually a shepherd and later became king. When he became king, he gave up being a shepherd; although caring and providing for the people as king, he exercised a shepherd-like skill, despite his flaws as a human being.

In the messianic oracle in Jeremiah 23, Jeremiah is given a vision far into the future. Warning those who claim to be shepherds but really destroy and scatter the sheep—alluding to religious leaders of his day—Jeremiah says, "For the days are surely coming," far off in the future when new shepherds will come, who will gather the people back into the fold. This will be a gathering the likes of which the world has never seen. While Jeremiah speaks of "shepherds," plural, who will lead the people, he also has a vision of a righteous branch from the line of David, a new king like David. If we hold these two visions together, we've given the image of a shepherd-king, who "shall execute justice and righteousness in the land," when people will live in safety because the shepherd will care for the flock. God will do this because "The LORD [Yahweh] is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6).

What is remarkable about this messianic oracle, this vision of a coming Messiah, is that a different kind of shepherd, a different kind of king, will come. Yes, a Messiah will come, someone who will save God's people but not through military might, not with the point of the spear. The Messiah won't be a military hero who will vanquish oppressors with the sword. This is not an image of militant nationalism, an image of the Messiah that developed later in some circles of Judaism. Instead, Jeremiah has an entirely different vision, the Messiah as shepherd, who is also king, who rules and reigns like a shepherd, a shepherd who cares for the needs of the people, who provides safety, and security, who wields power, but a different kind of power that the world neither values nor understands.

This shepherd-king, this righteous branch of David, never really emerged for either Judah or Israel—at least not in the way they imagined. For the early Church, though, the promise was fulfilled. A better king did come whose birth was announced first to "shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Lk. 2:8), and later glorified, crowned, and enthroned, as it were, on a cross that displayed his crime and claims—"This is the King of the Jews" (Lk. 23:38), mocking him. "Both the king and the kingdom he established were of a different nature than what David and Solomon had once established but" we could say, "its glory really did (and does) outstrip gilded buildings of stone and cedar."<sup>1</sup> The first Christians came to know, that "Salvation came, not just to Judah but to the whole world," but in an unlikely way, "and if the way in which it came was surprising, so finally is the reach of that salvation to all the peoples of the earth."<sup>2</sup> Salvation to all the people of the earth through this unlikely shepherd-king.

Today is Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, the culmination of the liturgical calendar, a day that lifts this motif of Christ as the giver of salvation for all people, who rules over the world with justice and righteousness. That's why we have this lectionary reading from Jeremiah 23, along with the Gospel reading from Luke 23:33-43 and Colossians 1:11-20 (which I decided not to focus on today). This feast day was added to the calendar in 1925 by Pope Pius XI to stress the kingship of Christ during a time when authoritarianism and fascism were on the rise throughout Europe after the First World War. In the years that followed, many Protestant and Orthodox communions joined the Catholic Church by adding this day to the calendar on the Sunday before Advent.

It must be granted it's an odd feast day. It's certainly not a Sunday that packs people into the pews. It's difficult to preach on this theme. We really don't know what to do with it. Sometimes we ignore it altogether and focus on giving thanks, as the Thanksgiving holiday is often several days away. The word "king" is problematic. We soften it a little by calling it the Reign of Christ. Whether "king" or "reign," this monarchial language "is wedded to social privilege and pyramids of wealth and power and invested with centuries of inequities...."<sup>3</sup> Christianity has a terrible record when it comes to any sort of kingship. Diana Butler Bass, a church historian, reminds us, "Christians haven't done well with kingship—not in history and not now. We've far too often desired our own Jesus-Caesar to kick earthly kings and emperors in the teeth. We've wanted our Jesus, our vision of Christ, to triumph politically and execute not justice but vengeance. Too many Christians desire an ecclesiastical pyramid of power to rule over the world."<sup>4</sup> Christ as king is a symbol or metaphor that doesn't carry the same meaning that it used to, particularly when kings and queens have lost their luster and power. Diana Butler Bass, writing in her blog [Sunday Musings from The Cottage](#), released just this morning, wishes she had the power to remove this day from the Christian calendar.

I wonder, though, given the rise of authoritarian, fascist governments and a renewed obsession with Christian nationalism—in Russia, Europe, and even here in the United States, it might be worthy of a renewed focus for the church. Our times are not dissimilar to Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.

If you go down into the catacombs in Rome and go to the oldest sections of the catacombs, where Christians gathered for worship, for communion, and where Christians buried their loved ones, you won't find the symbol of the cross anywhere. It's nowhere to be found. The cross was a Roman method of execution for enemies of the empire. Only in the early fourth century did the cross take on meaning as a symbol for Christians. The image you do find in the catacombs, however, is Jesus as shepherd, the Good Shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders. It's Jesus as Shepherd who is the true Lord of the universe, not Caesar. Caesar thinks he is king. Christians worshipping in subversive secrecy, down in the depths, bow before Jesus Christ and offer praise and thanksgiving to the Shepherd-King, both shepherd *and* king—not either-or, but both-and. There's something about holding these two images, these two symbols, together that modifies and tempers our understanding of what it means to be king and shepherd, and when we hold them together, something new, a new symbol is formed. This Shepherd-King paradox carries a power that Caesar and the world will never understand. Keeping tension, this image holds an enormous amount of power—redemptive power. For Christ reigns over our lives like a shepherd, one who cares for us, and holds us, and loves us, in whose strong arms we are safe and secure.



*Jesus the Good Shepherd (2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century, CE), Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, Italy*

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, Commentary on Jeremiah 23:1-6 for November 20, 2022, Calvin Center for Excellence in Preaching, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-11-14/jeremiah-231-6-3/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hoezee.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “King Jesus. Really?” Sunday Musings, November 20, 2022.

<https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-ea7>.

<sup>4</sup> Bass.