

Palm Sunday sermon

We have no king but Caesar. And with that, the chief priests sealed Jesus' fate. We have no king but Caesar. And with that, the chief priests turned their back on God.

Remember way back in the early days of Israel? Back in the days of the Judges? Things were such a mess that the people decided they needed a king. Only thing is, God was supposed to be their king. Living in relationship with God and following the God way of life was to be a light to the rest of the nations. It was their own failure that led to the mess. The prophet Samuel warned them that kings would be trouble – that a human king would not be the answer they were looking for.

He was right. God gave them what they wanted, but with a few exceptions, most of the kings were corrupt. Now, the Jewish people were living in a land occupied by the Roman empire. Caesar was politically their overall ruler. Herod, technically a Jew, was the Rome appointed king of the Palestinian province – king of the Jews. He was corrupt.

The chief priests hitched their wagon to Rome. The Temple after all was prospering. The Temple authorities – the chief priests, the scribes, the Temple police – they held a lot of power.

As long as they didn't let anyone get riled up and bring the wrath of Rome down on them, they could hang on to that power – maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the ordinary Jews struggled. Roman taxes were high to support the Roman military and to support the lavish building projects Herod completed during his reign. Temple taxes added to the strain. But the plight of the Jewish peasants was not of importance to the ruling authorities of the Jewish people.

We have no king but Caesar. This Jesus? Talking about love and self-sacrifice? He's not our king.

In John's gospel, the people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem shouting their Hosanna's were the people who had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. They believed Jesus was king...the king promised to come from that very line of kings in the Old Testament.

The blood of the Pharisees ran cold as they saw the exuberance of the crowd in that procession. This was the very thing they feared. When the Roman authorities got wind of this, they could all be crushed.

So the wheels of the Jewish religious authorities started turning to find a way to get Jesus executed so they wouldn't all die.

Over Lent, we've followed their efforts. We've followed Jesus who kept true to his mission – the one he knew would end this way. The mission that would show the world that God as king looks completely different than Caesar's world.

It's not as clear in John what the involvement of the ordinary people was in this scene before Pilate. In the other gospels, they are clearly there. The chief priests get them stirred up and they turn against Jesus.

While we don't see much of the ordinary people at the trial scene, we do know that Jesus' disciples wouldn't even admit to the authorities that they were Jesus' followers. The crowds of supporters who entered Jerusalem hailing Jesus as a king were nowhere to be seen here in front of Pilate.

We have no king but Caesar. The people here before Pilate did not want a change to the status quo. And nobody who wanted things to stay pretty much as they were wanted a king like Jesus. They wanted the strength and might of a Caesar...a king who could maintain order and keep the economic system in place that kept them wealthy, often at the expense of the peasants.

After World War I, sanctions against Germany left people impoverished and desperate. Conditions allowed for the rise of the National Socialist Party, the Nazis, and their leader, Adolph Hitler.

The German Evangelical Church, the Lutheran church in Germany, split into two factions. One attempted to fuse Christian theology with German nationalism. They bemoaned the impurity of the church and the Jewish influence on Christianity. They wanted a racially pure church.

Although they didn't call their ruler Caesar, they essentially said the same thing. They liked what Hitler was doing for the country.

This prompted formation of the Confessing Church in Germany. Again, Lutherans. They opposed the German nationalism of the church and the warped theology that supported it. They stood by the original confessions of the church. But with some notable exceptions, their protests did not extend to questioning the legitimacy of the Nazi state. Hitler was still their king...or dictator.

But within that confessing church, a resistance to the Nazis did grow. There were people, both Catholic and Lutheran who knew that the Nazi regime did not look like Jesus' kingdom.

What did it look like to stand by Jesus as king in Nazi Germany? Pretty often it looked like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, a pastor in the German Evangelical Church, spoke boldly against the Nazi's treatment of the Jews. He knew this was dangerous and could lead to his death.

He famously quoted, When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die.

And Bonhoeffer did, hanged by the Nazis for his part in a plot to end the Nazi regime. And although his part in a violent plot injected some ambiguity into his actions in face of the Christian story, many other stories were unambiguous. Many people, both Catholic and Lutheran, were martyred for simply trying to hide Jews or help them get to safety.

Preachers were watched carefully to make sure they weren't preaching anything against the Nazi regime. And of course, if you're actually going to preach Jesus as he is revealed in the gospels, the reaction of the Nazis would be pretty much what the reactions of the Pharisees, and the Chief Priests and scribes was to Jesus – this one's got to go.

And like what happened to Jesus, massive evil was perpetrated when the church forgot not just who its king was, but just what kind of king he is.

In a time when Christian nationalism has risen in strength in our country, we would do well to remember who our true king is and equally importantly, just what kind of king he is.

He is not a king who blesses any one nation over others. He's not a king who would endorse the God, flag, and guns of Christian nationalism.

Instead, He is a king who challenges the status quo that allows wealth and power to rule the day. He's a king who, rather than demand total honor for himself, got down on his knees and washed his disciples' feet.

He is a king whose kingdom is not ruled by the values of this world...the values that say that the strongest, wealthiest, and most powerful always win. He's a king who went willingly to his death to draw all people to himself and into that kingdom.

Today and over the next week, it will look like the kingdom of this world's values does win. We know how the story ends, so we know different.

But for today, we sit with the confession of the religious leaders and with the silence of the crowd as they swore, we have no king but Caesar.

