

Christ Is King

Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Who is the head of the church?

If you ask some children, and even some adults, you'd hear this answer. "Pastor Matt is head of the church." I think that answer is almost as funny as you think it is.

Indeed, at the Christmas Eve worship service at my first church, Gordon and Joyce McLerran had their grandkids and children with them. Gordon and Joyce didn't raise their kids in the church, mainly, because Gordon spent his whole working life upset with God and openly angry at the church. So, his out of town grandkids had never been to a Christmas Eve service, and possibly had never been to church. The lights were dim. It was cold outside. The congregation was family huddled together. As I stepped up to the pulpit in my preaching robe to welcome the flock, we all heard Gordon's grandson ask, "Hey Pop-pop. Is that the *president?*"

The fact is not only am I not the president, I'm not the head of the church. We all know Eric Corbin is the head of the church. (Pause in the hopes of laughter.)

The constitution of the PCUSA makes it clear who the head of the church is: Jesus the Christ is head of the church. Jesus has all authority. Jesus calls and equips the church. Jesus gives the church its life. Jesus gives the church its hope. Jesus is the foundation of the church. The church is the body of Christ. All of these truths come from scripture.

The pastor of the church is not the head of the church, no matter how presidential he or she may look in a preaching robe. Jesus is. Jesus is head of the church.

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We forget that Jesus is the head of the church some times. When somebody complains about something in the church, we all scramble to appease that person; in so doing, we might misconstrue that they and their concern as the most important thing. In some churches, the choir is head of the church. Or, the Presbyterian Women's group is the head of the church. Or a matriarch or patriarch seems to be head of the church. Sometimes the personality of a pastor and politics may seem to take center stage, or the youth group, or the budget, or the "good old days" of the church, or the tremulous future. These and myriad others often take the center stage. Sometimes lesser things and concerns become the "head of the church."

But Jesus is the only head of the church. And Jesus is always the head of the church.

Paul puts it this way in his letter to the church at Colossi. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation, begotten in the image of God. Jesus is first. Jesus is our glue—he holds us together. God fully dwells in Jesus, and God has made reconciling peace through Jesus...through his life, his blood, his resurrection.

For Paul, there's little room to be confused. Jesus is The Dude, The Man, The Righteous One, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King.

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I'm always grateful on this day of the Christian year to be reminded that Christ is King. Christ is head of the church. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year; next Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday of the Christian year. Our whole calendar year is bookended by Jesus. Today we reflect upon the fact that Jesus is the head of the church, he is our Good Shepherd, our High Priest, our King. Jesus reigns. Next Sunday, we begin getting ready for the coming of Christ the King in a manger. Our Christian year starts with Jesus and ends with Jesus.

Gerrit Van Honthorst is a Dutch painter. His paintings play with the contrasts between dark and light; he is a master at chiaroscuro. He did a drawing of Jesus in the garden on the Mount of Olives. The picture describes the scene before he is arrested, before he is taken to the Sanhedrin, before he is taken to Pilate. Before he is humiliated, beaten, and crucified.

This picture is on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, in a series of drawings entitled *Reubens, Rembrandt, and the Golden Age*. (Until January 5th).

Here Jesus doesn't look like the King of anybody, much less the King of the Jews. This is a dark, torturous night for Jesus. He could have run away. He could have changed his plans. But he chooses to stay the course. How else will the whole world know down through the generations that God so loves the world?

So here we have a picture of our faithful savior in the darkest few hours of his life. Sticking it out for us.

Which is one of many reasons we say Christ is King.

I invite you into this picture.

Christ on the Mount of Olives
Gerrit Van Honthorst
Urrecht 1592-1656

Jesus sits heavily on the ground
in the garden on the Mount of Olives.
The disciples in the brown distance
have all but lost their battle with sleep.

Above them, in the sky, like a vision, an angel
struggles setting a cross into the cleft of a stone.
Another angel leans over Jesus from
behind, peering at him with an

expression that spells concern. The air around them
vibrates from the movement of her wings—but she's
careful not to touch him, which makes him seem all the more
alone.

He gazes up off the page, in my direction—
seeking the face of God? His open palms suggest sub-
mission or surrender. They might also be pleading or asking
questions.

He looks spent under the weight of this cataclysmic night,
like his robes have turned to concrete, his skin marble,
light, life, and thought—even the gaze of angels—having become
freighted with led. It's not that the world

is on his shoulders so much as the world has gotten
under his skin, every blood cell swollen with
inevitability. His center of gravity, his heart, is the
heaviest of all hearts on this heaviest of nights.

With some struggle, he will stand up, stepping out of the corner
into which he has painted himself. He'll go as he is led to go, first by
Judas, then by the palace guard. The angels will abandon him;
his disciples, too. He'll stand where he's told to stand,

eventually slogging up a hill lugging his own cross. His feet will leave
only the slightest impression on the face of the earth,
but each print, outlined faintly in blood, will sufficiently
mark the way of his followers—keeping the safest of distances.

When my hour comes,
may I walk with him, alone no more,
certainly not in his footsteps
but in my bloodied own.

*My Lord,
My God,
King of mine own wayward heart.*

Epistle Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Gospel Luke 23:33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they

do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."