
Whose Side Are You On?

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 4, 2015 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

It's coronation day. No there has not been a transition in any royal families... at least not that I know of. Today is coronation day because today is the day we remember the shining of God's light on and through the young child Jesus, the long expected king of Israel. This epiphany, this revelation of God's light for the whole world through Jesus, is an opportunity for us to celebrate Jesus as a royal—deemed such from his earliest days. Yet as we remember this epiphany—this revealing of God in the young Jesus—we should pause to allow the strangeness of this revelation to sink in. Jesus is but a small child, a mere infant, proclaimed king—a proclamation so significant that it inspired fear in King Herod and all of Jerusalem with him. Even as a babe, Jesus already was a threat to the powers that were in charge, a challenge to the governing status quo, a reminder that change was a comin'. Beyond his youth, let's notice that Jesus was born on the other side of the tracks, in the wrong place, a location lacking the prestige and power of Jerusalem. No one, except maybe the prophets, would expect a ruler from such a place as Bethlehem.

As strange as his age and birthplace are, what is particularly striking about this revelation of Jesus as king is who it is that "sees the light." Neither the scribes, nor the chief priests, nor any other representative of the people of God deliver the earliest proclamation of Jesus as the "king of the Jews." Rather, wise men from a distant land announce the coronation proclamation. Our Gospel lesson tells the story of the magi—gentile astrologers, watchers of the skies—traveling from the East, a little confused and wayward at times, needing a bit of direction, but nevertheless successful in traveling to the one who had been born the king. These gentile journeyers—these representatives of the nations—wandered their way to Jesus, were filled with joy, worshipped him as the king, and presented him with gifts.

This early recognition by outsiders, strangers, people far off from God's covenant seems surprising. Yet, within the context of the story of Jesus in Matthew, it makes good sense. We should remember how persistently Matthew narrates the story of Jesus through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures in order to reveal more deeply who Jesus is. Matthew knew the prayer book of the Psalms, and here he gestures toward a Royal Psalm—one of the prayers spoken with God's king in mind. In his story-shaped way, the Gospel writer reminds those with ears to hear of that Royal Psalm that is our Old Testament reading for today: Psalm 72, a prayer likely spoken on the day of a new king's coronation. This Psalm envisions a time when the kings from everywhere, from all the nations, pay tribute, give gifts, and bow down before God's king. According to the Psalm, the nations come not simply because they must pay a tax levied against them but because when God's faithful king rules all the people of earth find blessing. Matthew is directing attentive listeners of the Gospel to Psalm 72, so we can understand more fully what kind of king we should expect Jesus to be.

So what kind of king might we expect? What might be the priorities of Jesus' royal reign? What might the gospel writer be indicating Jesus will emphasize in his rule? Let's listen closely to Psalm 72. "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice." The people petition God for a king committed to justice and righteousness. Justice and righteousness are the comprehensive individual and societal commitment to life ordered according to God's ways. Life well ordered means the flourishing of individuals and communities, of the one and the many, of a person and the whole society. For God's king, being and doing and relating according to God's desires matters both for the individual and for the whole of society. God's king has the personal and the political in view when it comes to justice and righteousness. In pointing to the kind of king Jesus is, the Psalmist shows that Jesus has this rightly ordered world as a chief matter of concern.

The Psalm continues, "May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness." And later in the prayer the Psalmist writes, "May there be abundance of grain in the land;

may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.” The image here is of a flourishing creation through which God blesses the people. When the king is living and leading according to the righteousness and justice of God, the land thrives and the earth produces abundantly. Though it may be a stretch from this Psalm to say that this king prioritizes the well-being of the land, God’s creation clearly benefits from the justice of God’s king.

The ideal king of Psalm 72 has another priority at heart—the welfare of the materially poor. The Psalmist prays, “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” What’s more is this king will receive tribute, gifts, worship, and service because “he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted poor also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the weak and needy, and the lives of the needy he will save. He will redeem their life from oppression and violence; and their blood will be precious in his sight.” Not only do God’s people desire their king to be concerned for the poor, the Psalm declares that God’s true king will be the defender, helper, and redeemer of the materially poor, and it is precisely this that will validate him as God’s king and will draw the attention of the kings of the nations.

Psalm 72 shows us that God’s king stands on the side of God’s justice and righteousness, the side of freedom from oppression, and the side of deliverance for the poor, the weak, and the needy. Matthew points us toward Psalm 72 to indicate that this is the kind of King that the young Jesus is going to be. I wonder how you receive the revelation that this is the kind of King that Jesus is? I wonder how you hear this word about who the Messiah, the Christ is? I wonder where you find yourself as you are reminded of God’s concern for the poor?

I suspect for some of us, this is a message of hope. Maybe for you it is good news to be reminded that God’s justice is particularly oriented toward the materially poor, the needy, and the afflicted. Maybe for you hearing that a world that works against the causes of the poor is no world of God’s intention or order. Maybe this is the first time you’ve heard that God doesn’t blame poor folks like you or your family for your poverty the way so many others do. Maybe it is sheer blessing for you to know that God does not act as if most people who are materially poor have some sort of defect or are lazy or incompetent. Perhaps it is refreshing to be reminded that God has your good on God’s mind, and that God’s just society involves redemption for those who are poor and a setting right of the things that constantly press people—maybe even especially people like you—deeper into the abyss of lack and need. There is much hope here when God’s war on poverty through this king does not become a war against the poor.

I wonder if you find yourself desperately praying for such a king, such a leader, as this? It’s fashionable in the political rhetoric of our day to call for a leader who looks out for the middle class, but there isn’t much political pressure for leaders that care definitively for the needs of the materially poor. Most potential leaders direct their political pandering toward the powerful rather than the poor. Maybe in the prayer of Psalm 72 you could hear the prophetic ring, the critique of this method of politicking? It is a kind of prayerful protest against the typical rulings of those in power, against the systemic imbalances that keep the materially poor in need and the materially rich in power. Maybe you can almost hear the chants and songs made popular in recent protests coming through in this prayer. “What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now.” Or, “Money’s for jobs and education, not for war and incarceration.” Or, “Whose side are you on, my people? Whose side are you on? Whose side are you on, my people? Whose side are you on? We’re on the freedom side.” And the Psalmist would say more, we’re on the justice side; we’re on the side of the poor; we’re on the side of the oppressed; we’re on the righteous king’s side.

This is the good news for any who are materially poor this morning, God’s justice and righteousness, God’s concern, and God’s king—that is Jesus—are all for you. Jesus stands in solidarity with those who are needy, afflicted, oppressed and bound up. Jesus is all for bringing about the redemption and rescue of any who are poor and needy, and he comes as one born not into the dwelling place of kings but into the lowly stable, with no place to lay his head; he comes as one who is poor. So we watch, and wait, and work in hope for the time when God’s king will once and for all deliver, save, and rescue.

If for some this is a message of hope, for others of us, this is a word of sharp challenge, rebuke, and even warning. The Psalmist desires that through this king God would crush the oppressor, that the enemies of God's king would be made low, and that they would even be made to lick the dust of the ground... humbled and humiliated as those who opposed the interests of God's king. For some of us, seeking wealth has become our all. Our net worth is our idol, and checking our financial portfolios is our obsession. That God's concern, attention, and deliverance is for the poor certainly challenges us to turn our attention to the priorities of God's king. And if we knowingly take advantage of others in order to deepen our pockets, or we actively support policies and laws that will surely benefit us at the expense of those on the bottom, then the warning is clear: God's reckoning is coming for those who oppose God's justice.

Maybe you, like me, want to back your way out from under the pressing conviction of this passage as quickly as possible. So we mount our rebuttal: "We look out for those who are in need; we sponsor an angels off of Angel Trees; we give some extra money to help those down on their luck; we even give money to the church." What more can God expect? God expects and calls for a world that operates in justice and righteousness—where the poor are treasured and where the needy find deliverance and rescue and freedom. Allow me to remind you of a few realities of our world: Oxfam International reported early in 2014 that almost half of the world's wealth is owned by one percent of the population and that 7 out of 10 people live in countries where over the last 30 years there has been increasing economic inequality (that is where the poor have become poorer while the rich have become richer); UNC Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity reported in 2010 the vast disparities of income and wealth between African Americans and whites in North Carolina; Our state is one where African American households claim 4% of the net worth that white households claim. God's just and righteous world beckons us to a more equitable societal reality, to a world where flourishing is possible for all—not just for some. For us to live as those who benefit from the reality of inequity and the systems that perpetuate it without challenging those systems is to act—even if passively—against the priorities of God's king. For us to be people of God's king, individual acts of mercy will not suffice; we must pursue justice. This Psalm is a word of challenge.

Whether the Psalmist's prayer is for us a source of hope or of warning, this prayer is most importantly a word of invitation. The Psalmist says that because God's king delivers the afflicted, has compassion on the poor, saves the lives of the needy, and rescues them from oppression and violence, he receives the praise, adoration, and worship of the nations. With the light of Psalm 72 shining onto Jesus as the star did, we see why the wise men of the nations traveled great distance, brought gifts, worshiped and were overwhelmed with joy when finding God's king. Like the magi, those of us who are poor and those of us who are rich are all invited to seek and find this king even if our journey is long. We are invited to worship this king in word and deed. We are invited to bring our gifts—however materially great or small they are—and offer them to God's King. And when we've journeyed long to find the one who brings about God's just world, we will be overwhelmed with joy. After all, when the world is set right, and when God's king rules, there is peace among the nations, and prospering and flourishing for all. How can this not inspire joy?

I wonder what it will look like for you to travel a great distance to encounter God's justice this year? Maybe the distance is merely across town or across the street to meet and truly know someone dramatically richer or poorer than you. Maybe the distance you will travel is greater both literally and metaphorically. Will you travel? I wonder what it means for you to worship God in word and deed, in action and truth? Maybe it will require worship to move beyond these walls. Will you worship? I wonder how you are being called to bring your gifts/your assets (regardless of whether they show up on a sheet of wealth calculation) and offer them to King Jesus for the sake of his just world? Maybe bringing gifts will require you to take inventory of your gifts and assets for the first time. Will you bring your gifts? And I wonder at what point you will recognize and experience the joy that awaits?

In this new year, may you find yourself on the side of justice, on the side of freedom from oppression, on the side of the poor, on the side of God's just and righteous king... that is on Jesus' side. And there, may you be filled with great joy! Amen.