

Today is the last Sunday of the Church year. It is named Christ the King Sunday. On the Feast of Christ the King, we focus on the meaning of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus has many titles in scripture and in the church. I'll mention four of them right now: King, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God.

In fact, I have a pop quiz. Don't worry. This won't be for a grade. Here's the question. Which of these 4 titles is the most lofty and exalted for Jesus: King, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God?

((show of hands))

Now, in the church, Son of God is probably the most exalted title. Jesus as the only-begotten Son of the Father, the second person of the Trinity. "God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God."

Ironically, though, in Jesus' time, the title "Son of God" did not have this strong a meaning. In fact, in Jesus' time, Son of God, Son of David, and King all meant the same thing: they were three titles for the monarch. In Psalm 2, God speaks to the king and says, "You are my son, today I have become your father." Son of God was a description of a human king.

In Jesus' time, the most lofty title of the four is not King, nor its equivalents Son of David and Son of God. In Jesus' time, the most lofty title is Son of Man. That's probably a surprise. So let's talk about it.

Originally in the OT, "Son of Man" simply meant 'human being' or 'mortal.' That's the way it's used over and over again, until we get to the book of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, Son of Man is given a whole new significance.

We heard from the 7th chapter of Daniel this morning. The prophet describes a spiritual vision of God's heavenly throne. He speaks of God as the Ancient of Days, or Ancient One. This doesn't mean that God is an old man. It means that God has existed from before time itself.

Daniel says, "As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool."

Again, this white hair doesn't mean that God is an old man, or even a man at all. White is symbolic language for purity and holiness.

Daniel continues by describing the throne:

"His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him."

What a picture. A throne of fire, with fire flowing out from God's very presence. The fire is a symbol of God's incredible power. And since the importance of a ruler often

depends upon how big his court is, Daniel tells us that God's court is incomparably enormous: there are 10,000 times 10,000 in attendance upon God.

Then, Daniel has a further vision.

"As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him."

One like a human being. The literal translation is: "One like a son of man."

Let's pop that into v13: "I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him."

This Son of Man is no average human being. Daniel gives a very specific description of his power and authority:

"To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."

Daniel describes the Son of Man as having kingship. But it's a very different kind of kingship. It is universal and eternal. That means that the Son of Man is more than an average human being. There is something special and heavenly about him.

So let's pause and take stock for a moment, because I want to make sure we're all on the same page. In the Jewish world leading up to Jesus' time, Son of David and Son of God were two different titles for the role of the king, or the messiah. Son of David and Son of God both implied a physical, military and political kingship.

Son of Man on the other hand, had 2 meanings. Before Daniel's time, it simply meant mortal or human being. After Daniel's time, it meant some kind of eternal and universal king who would have power over all the earth. In fact, in between Daniel and Jesus, it was thought that the Son of Man would be the one to judge the world at the resurrection of the dead. Everybody with me? Okay.

Now when we look through the Gospels, all 3 of these titles are used to describe Jesus: Son of David, Son of God, and Son of Man. But it's important to look at how many times each title is used and who is using them. Thankfully my Bible software can crunch all this out in less than a second.

"Son of David" appears 17 times in the Gospels. One of those times is in reference to Joseph, Jesus' father. The other 16 times are in reference to Jesus. But Son of David is always a title used by other people about Jesus. He never uses it of himself, except for one very sideways reference about the nature of the Messiah.

"Son of God" appears 22 times. 20 of those times the title is used by other people about Jesus. Only twice does Jesus use it about himself, in a somewhat circular sense.

However, "Son of Man" appears 98 times in the Gospels, and every time it is used by Jesus. A few times he talks about it as part of the job description of the Messiah. But most of the time he uses it to refer to himself.

Son of Man is obviously Jesus' title of choice for himself. And it's a very shrewd choice. Son of Man operates on 3 levels all at the same time:

#1 It could be interpreted in the pre-Daniel sense: mortal or human being. If Jesus' enemies are trying to trap him, there's some deniability, some room for doubt. "Maybe he's just talking about being a normal human being." And of course, Jesus was human, so this is true.

#2 It could be interpreted in the post-Daniel sense: The Son of Man is God's anointed and heavenly agent who will be the eternal king over all the earth. This also, of course is true.

#3 It was a way that Jesus could shift the focus of what people were expecting in a Messiah. They wanted a political and military king, a Son of David or Son of God. Jesus talks about himself in more heavenly and universal terms as Son of Man. Very, very shrewd on his part.

This really becomes important in Jesus' trial. I want to talk for a moment about the trial Matthew, and then the trial from John which was our Gospel reading this morning. First Matthew.

The first of Jesus' two trials is the Jewish trial before the chief priests and the elders in Matthew 26. They're trying to convict Jesus, but just can't gather enough testimony.

Jesus has been silent to all their accusations. Then the high priest asks him directly, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."¹

Notice the question: are you the Son of God? Are you the political and military messiah? That's still the rut they're stuck in. But Jesus gives an unexpected response:

"You have said so." Those are your words. That's your title for me.

Then Jesus continues: "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."²

If you haven't noticed, Jesus is quoting right out of Daniel ch7.

In other words, he is saying, 'My kingship is not a matter of an earthly kingdom in the way you understand it. My kingdom and my authority are heavenly. I am the Son of Man. I am the one who will judge the living and the dead.' And this response really upsets the high priest.

¹ Mt 26:63

² Mt 26:64

The high priest tears his clothes as a response to what Jesus says. For any mere mortal to claim to be the Son of Man is blasphemy. Of course, what the high priest misses out on is that Jesus is no mere mortal. He IS also the Son of Man.

So the priests send Jesus off to Pilate. And we read a portion of that trial in our Gospel lesson from John ch18.

At heart, it's a very similar dynamic to what happened in Matthew.

Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" It's a question asked in political, earthly terms.

The heart of Jesus' response is, "My kingdom is not from this world." In other words, it's not a political and military kingdom in the way you understand it. But notice Jesus never denies being a king. He just denies being the kind of king Pilate is expecting.

Pilate says, "So you are a king?" Jesus answers, "You say that I am a king."

Basically, 'That's your term,' and the implication is that Pilate's understanding is limited.

But Jesus still claims his different kingship, his heavenly kingship as his role. He says, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

He is the true king, and his kingship is all about proclaiming God's truth. Though he's not the kind of king Pilate and the Jewish people understand, he is a king nonetheless.

Jesus, the Son of Man is our king.

We celebrate that reality on Christ the King Sunday. But we must never forget that he's not the kind of ruler that we often think he is.

Jesus doesn't rely upon getting out the vote. There are no debates or primaries. Jesus is not a Republican or Democrat. Jesus doesn't rule by military power and might.

Instead, he is the divine Son of Man who will judge the living and the dead. He is the one who is given eternal "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." He is the king whose rule is everlasting.

Son of Man, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To him be honor and glory, now and forever.