

Text: Selected verses from John's Gospel

Theme: Christ, Our Compassionate King

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In many ways 2006 was not a good year. The situation in Iraq has not improved. It could get better, but it could also get worse. We think that North Korea now has the atom bomb and may not have the normal reasons for restraining its use. Natural disasters, floods, fires and earthquakes continue to devastate homes and lives. The deterioration of the family continues, leaving many children deprived of needed nurturing care. And some of us know this from personal experience.

For me and for many of us 2006 also brought blessings worth remembering for a lifetime And we're looking forward to more good things in 2007. But experience teaches that those good things don't have to happen. Or we may not live long enough to experience them.

But I am optimistic about the new year, and you should be too. For whatever misfortune may come our way, we have a compassionate King in heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, who will carry us in his arms through the new year toward the goal of our home in heaven. This is another one of the themes that is prominent in John's gospel. Today I want to explore that theme with you one more time, as we bring to a close this series of sermons based on that portion of God's Word.

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry Nathaniel recognized Jesus as the King of Israel. Nathaniel was very much aware of the Old Testament prophecies of a future king, a king like David, who would rescue God's people. He probably was looking for a political king who would free Israel from Roman rule, but nevertheless, his first meeting with Jesus led him to confess that Jesus was the King of Israel

And Jesus was indeed a King, but not a political king. If Jesus had wanted political power, he could have organized his followers into an army which would fight to bring him into power. But Jesus never intended to be that kind of king, nor does he intend to rule like that at any time in the future. Rather he is a spiritual King who rules by impressing sinners with his compassion and love, so that they want to trust him and obey him.

His enemies mocked the idea that Jesus was a king. They dressed him in a royal garment and put a crown on his head, a crown of thorns, and ridiculed him by pretending to honor him. The notice placed above Jesus' head on the cross proclaimed, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

But abuse and mockery could not change the fact the Jesus was indeed a King who would rule over millions of Christians over thousands of years, not by force of arms, but by the force of his sacrificial love which earned forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who believe in him.

A good king cares about his subjects. He uses his wealth and power to benefit the people over whom he rules. Our Jesus is just that kind of king. With all power in heaven and on earth he rules the world for our benefit, protecting our souls from the attacks of Satan and an evil world, guiding our lives through the troubles that surround us to our eternal home in heaven.

Jesus cares about sinners. He cares about you and me. He demonstrated that often during his earthly ministry. He was touched by the social embarrassment of the groom who was running out of wine at his wedding. So Jesus took ordinary wash water and turned it into gallons of the finest wine so that the wedding feast could continue. When thousands of people followed him into the wilderness to hear his teaching, he had compassion on the hungry crowd and so he multiplied a little boy's lunch into food for everyone with plenty of leftovers.

When Jesus saw people suffering with physical ailments, his heart was moved to bring them relief. He took pity upon a cripple who could not move fast enough to get into the healing water in time, so he restored strength to the man's legs. When a royal official pleaded with Jesus to heal his son, Jesus responded by restoring the boy to health. Jesus had compassion upon a man who had been born blind and made him see for the first time in his life. Jesus was a King who used his wealth and power for the benefit of his people.

Jesus had compassion upon his disciples when they were struggling to reach land in an angry sea. He walked to them on the water and brought their boat safely to land. Jesus showed his compassion even when he was in mortal danger himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane he protected Peter from violence by telling his rash disciple to put his sword away and then healing the soldier whom Peter had injured. When he saw his friends grieving over the death of their brother, Jesus reached out in compassion and brought Lazarus back from the dead.

Jesus also displayed compassion for those who were rejected and despised. Jews did not associate with Samaritans, but Jesus brought the water of life to the Samaritan woman at the well. The woman caught in the act of adultery was about to be stoned to death, but Jesus had compassion on her protected her from her accusers. Mary of Bethany was accused of wastefulness when she poured expensive perfume on his feet. Jesus was touched by such verbal abuse and not only defended her but also praised her act of reverence.

Who wouldn't be glad to be ruled by such a King, a King who cares about his subjects and uses his power for their benefit? In fact, that's exactly when happened after Jesus fed the five thousand in the wilderness. They

came looking for him and wanted to force him into being their king. But they were looking for an earthly king who would provide for their physical needs. These people thought life would be grand in a welfare state, where the government would guarantee everyone enough food to eat. But Jesus had no intention of becoming such a king.

To this day people are looking to Jesus for help with their earthly needs. They want Jesus to heal their diseases, to find their missing children, to help them get a job, to relieve their pain and suffering. And really there's nothing wrong with that, as long as we remember that Jesus is not a welfare king.

Jesus did not come into this world to relieve our physical necessities. That would have been easy for him. But we had a greater need, the need to be relieved of the burden of guilt that was dragging us down to hell. Death is not merely the end of life. Death came into the world because Adam and Eve sinned against God, and death remains in the world because we continue to disobey God and earn his punishment.

Death itself is bad enough, but it is only the beginning of the punishment we deserve. There is a place called hell which was created for the devil and his angels, and in hell there is room enough for all who disobey God. You and I are not as scared of hell as we should be, because we cannot imagine the suffering that goes on there. And if we could, we would distract our thoughts away from hell as much as possible.

But our King Jesus saw very clearly where we were headed, and dreaded the punishment that we would experience there. King Jesus cared about us so much that he chose to go through the punishment himself, to spare us the consequences of our sins. Because he was true God, capable of infinite suffering, he was able to endure all that everyone of us should have suffered for eternity. So King Jesus sacrificed himself on a cross to pay for the sins of the world. Because Jesus cared about us, he took our punishment upon himself, so that we would be free from the curse of hell and worthy of a place in heaven.

Of course, no one expects to die today. Thus our escape from hell and the blessing of heaven are usually far from our everyday thoughts. But the problem of our guilt returns to us over and over again. Perhaps it was an outburst of anger that alienated a spouse or a son or a daughter. Perhaps it was the influence of alcohol that caused a crippling accident. Perhaps it was preoccupation with income that left no time for nurturing children who responded to such inattention with frustration and anger. Or maybe we carry a crippling disease as the result of lust and adultery.

The burden of guilt can be buried under a blanket of pleasures so that we are rarely troubled by it. But it can also cause pain so severe that it leads to thoughts of violence and suicide. And sometimes those thoughts grow into actions that only increase the burden of guilt.

But those who are a part of Jesus' kingdom can always find relief from that burden. The guilt that weighs so heavily upon us has been washed away by the blood of King Jesus. When we confess our sins in the worship service, we hear God's authorized representative declare, "I forgive you your sins." Before God our guilt no longer exists. Perhaps we cannot forgive ourselves, but God's forgiveness tells us that our burden is self-imposed. We are not suffering because God holds our sins against us. As citizens of Jesus' kingdom we are as good as the angels who have never sinned. And in that blessed condition we can move on to do things that will make us proud of ourselves. Not that we deserve any honor from God, but that God confers that honor upon us because King Jesus had compassion on us and cleansed us from our sins.

In his compassion Jesus delivered us from the fear of death. In his compassion Jesus removed from us our burden of guilt. Because of him we have peace with God and peace with ourselves. And that is the greatest benefit that a compassionate King can give to his people.

There are some who hope for a time when Jesus will return to rule on earth and provide peace and prosperity for all. As we look at our troubled world today, we can see why people dream of peace and prosperity on earth. But outward peace and prosperity do not provide relief from the burden of guilt and hope for a blessed future in heaven. Our compassionate King has provided us with something better that is ours today, not in some distant future. Through Jesus we have peace with God and peace with ourselves. When we have that, we can say, "It is well with my soul," no matter what we may yet have to endure before we go to heaven.

However, this does not mean that King Jesus is oblivious to the problems we face here and now. Jesus has promised to hear and answer our prayers. The compassion that drove him to the cross for us cannot ignore the troubles that afflict us today. It's probably a good thing we don't know all the heartache and pain that will come our way in 2007. But whatever those troubles may be, we have a King in heaven who is also our Friend. We don't have to go through those troubles alone. With Jesus as our King we can face our troubles with hope and patiently wait for the deliverance that Jesus has planned for us.

One last thought from John's gospel. When Mary Magdalene came face to face with the risen Christ, Jesus not only comforted her. He was also thinking about his confused and frightened disciples who did not yet know that he was alive. He said to Mary, "Go and tell my brothers that they will see me."

As we face the future under the care of our compassionate King, we have the same assignment. We live in a world of confused and frightened people. They may appear to be secure and confident in their unbelief. But without Jesus they can only hope to get lucky. And when their luck runs out, so does their security and confidence.

We have security and confidence that is based upon a compassionate King who died for us and rose again. Let's share that good news as often as God gives us the opportunity.

Dear Lord Jesus,

Thank you for the compassion which led you to the cross to pay our debts to God. Grant to us peace with our God and peace with ourselves. Keep us safe during this new year, and remind us of your power and love in our times of trouble. Grant that we may show by our words and behavior that we are safe under your compassionate care. In your name we ask it. Amen.