

Sermon on John 18:33-37
Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Pontius Pilate was confused. We can start with that. Here was the reluctant Roman governor, stuck out in this isolated outpost in Palestine on the far eastern end of the Roman Empire, only here because it was his assignment. And a dreary assignment it was, stuck with a rebellious people who didn't take kindly to giving allegiance to the great Roman Emperor, way off in Rome, whom they would never see! It seemed to Pontius Pilate a no win situation, stuck out here putting down a Jewish rebellion every Passover it seemed (a religious holiday that smelled of insurrection, what with Hebrew slaves getting their revenge on the Egyptian overseers when the angel of the Lord killed the first born of the Egyptians, and the next morning they left for freedom in this "promised land"). What had he done to get himself assigned to this god-forsaken outpost governing an ungrateful people who would just as soon see him dead?

So today he had been summoned from his quarters by those insistent priests of the Temple, who said he had a crisis on his hands. He had to get up from lunch and deal with some rabble-rouser who had allegedly riled up the people by saying he was the "Messiah", the true king of the Jews – and for this he was supposed to pronounce judgment and execute him on the spot – because they didn't have the authority to do it themselves. With a sigh, Pontius Pilate entered the room to see what he was dealing with, and to get it done as soon as possible (and go back to lunch).

Then he saw the man, called Jesus of Nazareth, whose name meant "savior", yet only a carpenter by trade. He looked pretty beaten up, abused by King Herod's soldiers and the Temple guards. Kind of dirty, sweaty, puffed up by his bruises – he didn't look at all like a king, or even a worthy adversary. What in the world was going on here? And who was this Jesus? So he asked him:

"Are you the king of the Jews?"

And then this person surprised him by asking him back, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Well, what have we here? A prisoner with an *attitude*? Didn't this man know that he had the power to take his life or give it, in his own hands? Oh, well, I'll play along.

"I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus didn't answer the question Pilate had asked. Instead, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my

followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate maybe thought, this guy is making no sense at all. But he wasn't telling him what he wanted to know – why the Jewish priests had arrested him, handed him over and wanted him dead. Had this Jesus done something – or were they just jealous of him? So Pilate went back to his original question:

“So you are a king?” (Didn't look much like a king, but Pilate was curious.)

“You say that I am a king,” Jesus said. (Well, no he hadn't, Pilate thought.) “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Ah, *truth* – that's what the problem is, Pilate perhaps thought. Everybody is seeking truth – especially these religious types, but what can truth matter when all that matters is who has the power – who has the army – who has the last word? Truth, what good was it? So Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

That's where the conversation ends in our gospel passage today. There was more – but we won't deal with it until next spring, during Holy Week on Good Friday, when Pilate brought Jesus out in front of the people, offering to set him free if they wanted. But they didn't. The people of the mob, aroused by the Pharisees and priests who were enemies of Jesus, cried out for Pilate to crucify him. Which he did. But not without Pilate being convinced that Jesus was innocent of the charges against him. Still, Pontius Pilate didn't have the backbone to stand up to the mob, and so he handed Jesus over to be crucified. For Jesus wasn't much of a king to him – he was powerless and silent before his accusers, so he didn't deserve to live. And Pilate just didn't care. He washed his hands of the whole deal.

Today we worship God, and our Savior Jesus Christ, on a day we call Christ the King Sunday. “King of what,” we might ask! Pilate did! From looking at the state of our world today, with all the violence, greed, suffering and lack of faithfulness exhibited by its inhabitance, we would have to agree that Jesus is not presently the king of *this* world! Like Jesus said himself, “My kingdom is not of this world!” So what does it mean to call this Christ the King Sunday, and to call Jesus our Lord and king? It's not a term we use for anyone else!

The origins of this day can help us understand. This is not an ancient feast day (although using the title “king” for Jesus goes back to the 1st century). The feast day originated in the 20th century (not the first). Some of you will recall that in the 1920s and 1930s, fascism and militarism were on the rise in Europe and Asia – with the rise of the popularity and power of dictators like Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler in Germany (and the cult of the Emperor of Japan). We all know where that led – to the second World War and the destruction of their own countries. But there was a time when these dictators demanded and received the loyalty and adulation of their people. The Church also received pressure to add

their allegiance, and some people of faith had the courage to say no. Like the persecuted Christians in the first century, many risked their lives to give their allegiance to God, and not to earthly tyrants. So this feast day was born: as a statement of faith to the world that Jesus Christ is the true king of Christians.

So it begs the question today: if you and I say (with the whole Church) that Jesus Christ is our king, what does it mean? What does this say about Jesus, and what does this say about us? What is the truth that Jesus has given us?

First of all, knowing that Jesus doesn't look or sound anything like any earthly king is instructive. We mostly associate earthly kings with absolute power, material riches, and exploitation of the weak. (Not that all kings have been tyrants, but many have been, making most guilty by association!) But God had a different model for kings when God raised up kings for ancient Israel – they were to be more like shepherds, who would guide and protect their people, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the aged, widows and orphans. Very unlike most kings, who led armies into wars which resulted in widows and orphans! In the mold of King David, Jesus would be a new kind of king – who would not rule by force, but with love – in a kingdom of the hearts of his people. We sing of this kind of king in a familiar hymn with an Irish tune, based on the 23rd Psalm: *The king of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever.* This Jesus is a king who guides us through difficult times, even death itself, not with a sword – but with a shepherd's staff. This king doesn't feast in court with only the rich and powerful; Jesus invites us all to his table to feast with him – with the whole Church on earth, seated with the poor, the lame, and the sick. The symbol of this king Jesus is not a sword or a coat of arms – but a cross; and his crown is not made of gold or inlaid with precious jewels, but a crown of thorns and his precious blood, which gives us all life! The victory of our King Jesus is not the triumph of armies in battle, but the willingness of our Lord to lay down his life for the world, lifted up on a cross to die like a slave, so that we – and all the world would have life forever, through faith in him. His reign is one of future hope, for a new world of mercy, love, peace and justice that we all can share!

So to whom will you give your allegiance and life – the rulers of this world, or the king of love, our savior and friend, Jesus Christ? It's a question we are faced with daily, even when we are unawares! We make our choices when we choose between power or service, material riches or sharing our gifts, exploiting the weak or lifting them up to sit with us. For if we choose to follow Jesus as our king, we are called to follow his example of humility, service, and generosity – giving of ourselves to others as Christ has given himself to us. There is no room for the worship of false gods like Caesar, or dictators, demagogues or power hungry politicians when we worship God in Christ Jesus! This is actually good news for all of us, for it frees us from the empty promises of the rulers of this

world who cannot give us life. It leads us to lead lives of compassion and forgiveness and mercy for others, imitating our Lord and king. So I close with the question found in the title of our hymn of the day, which we are about to sing, *O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our king?*

Though some would make their greatness felt and lord it over all,

You said the first must be the last and service be our call.

O Christ, in workplace, church, and home, let none to power cling;

For still, through us, you come to serve, a different kind of king. Amen.