

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

A Different Kingdom

Sermon Reflection Notes

In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted the feast day of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. To understand why he did this, we should consider what was happening in the world at the time. Adolf Hitler published the first volume of *Mein Kampf* which detailed his descent into antisemitism and his goals for world domination. The Locarno Treaty was signed by several European nations to protect Germany's western frontier. A year later, more than 40,000 Ku Klux Klan members marched on Washington to demand immigration restrictions based on race and nationality.

Pope Pius wanted to counter what he perceived to be unhealthy nationalism and increased secularism. He called the church to declare Christ's kingship over all creation. The Christian's first allegiance is therefore to Christ, whatever the nation of their citizenship. Regardless of where in the world Christians live, they should be guided by their values as followers of Christ, over and above national movements or cultural ethics.

Reign of Christ Sunday brings us to the end of the liturgical year, and it brings us to the Good Friday story, in which Jesus is handed over to Pilate to be sentenced to death. His reaction to this event demonstrates the type of "king" he is, and he is a very different king indeed.

The story begins with armed paramilitary police forces moving in the dark of night to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. There they were, with torches and weaponry, expecting a battle, expecting a hardened and dangerous criminal perhaps, and instead they got Jesus. Just Jesus in his dirty clothes, no armor, no weapons, no vigilantes to defend him. And he doesn't even try to hide; he walks up to the lawmen and asks: "Who are you looking for?" and then admits "Oh that's me! Here I am!" When Peter tries to defend him and cuts off the right ear of one of the high priest's slaves, Jesus is having none of it. He tells Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath." In Luke's Gospel, Jesus goes so far as to heal the guy. There is no fight; there is no need for armed troops. Jesus insists on facing his final days without retaliation, with only nonviolence.

Eventually, Jesus's case is passed through the court system and lands with Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor who isn't really sure why he's dealing with this case at all. Pilate asks the priests "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They have no real answer. They have a conviction in search of a crime. So Pilate asks Jesus the only thing that mattered: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

This was a political question, not a religious one. What he really wants to know is if Jesus claims any political authority, if he is a threat to the empire, if he plans to mount an insurrection. In this time, Herod is King of the Jews and Caesar is King of all and to say

otherwise would be treason. So Pilate's question, "Are you King of the Jews?" is *the* question, it's the heart of it all. And on Christ the King Sunday, it's the question we are called to think about too.

We know Jesus's answer: "My Kingdom is not of this world." Pilate strikes, pointing out that if Jesus has a Kingdom, he must be a king, even though Jesus is unlike any king Pilate has even known. We, like Pilate, expect the pomp and circumstance, the regality, the show of wealth and might when we think of kings. But Jesus is a very different king indeed. He is a king who eats with the lowly and the rejected, who seeks to serve rather than be served.

He tells Pilate: "You say that I am a king. I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate famously responds with, "What is truth?" Blinded by his own preconceived notions, Pilate can't see the truth standing right in front of him in the form of Jesus.

As we observe Christ the King Sunday, saying that our hearts and lives are ruled by a king who employs nonviolence might not sound like the revolution it truly is. Jesus the king is so unlike what we think we know, so unlike what we assume power is, that "the way, the truth, and the life" are unrecognizable—even when it's right there. And the truth of God's Kingdom is that it is always right there with us. Pilate mocked Jesus even on the cross saying "Behold the King of the Jews" and we should do just that. Behold Jesus...this suffering king who did life with us, and died with us. Will we serve this king? Will we put away our swords, our pretense? Will we confront the powers that be with peacefulness and love, speaking the truth of an all good, all merciful, all loving king?

Scripture

John 18: 33-37 (NRSVUE)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to 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." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. 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."

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you imagine the church celebrates Christ the King Sunday at the end of the church year?
2. Why did the high priests insist that Jesus be arrested and tried as a criminal?

3. Ron used the King George III number from *Hamilton* to demonstrate how we typically think of kings: *Oceans rise, empire fall/We have seen each other through it all/And when push comes to shove/I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love!* What's the irony of that last phrase?
4. What does the irony of that phrase have to do with the sermon?
5. When confronting Jesus, the high priests ignored the truth of who Jesus was. Pilate walked away from the truth, literally walked away from Jesus. Jesus said: "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Describe a life that "belongs to the truth."
6. Ron asked us at the end of the sermon: "I wonder if you will serve this king? I wonder if you will put away your swords, put away your pretense, confront the powers that be, and speak the truth of an all good, all merciful, all loving king?" It sounds difficult to accomplish. How do we start?

Closing Prayer

God of truth, you have created the world and called it good. In your truthfulness, you have promised to love us always and steadfastly. In your truth you have announced 'This is my beloved Son.' In your truth you have said to us over and over again 'Fear not, I am with you.' And yet, in the midst of hearing and knowing your truth, we live in a world that calls evil good and good evil. Darkness is called light and light is called darkness. War is called peace, and peace is called war.

Give us courage to leave this pretend world of euphemisms. Give us the will to call things by their right name, to use things for their right use, and to love you and love our neighbor as you love us. Overwhelm our need to distort the truth and help us to go forth as those who belong to the truth. Help us to align our lives with your kingdom, your kingship, your sovereignty among us. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, Lord and Savior in our midst. Amen.

Paraphrased from a prayer by Walter Brueggemann,
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, p. 129

"Behold Christ the King!"