

Christ, Our King

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*Christ the King
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Text: John 18:33-38a

What kind of king? What kind of king is Jesus? It was a question that swirled around the man from Galilee who swept into Jerusalem that Sunday to waving palm fronds and cloaks spread across his path. It was a welcome fit for a king, for the Messiah, for God's anointed, the Son of David, the hope of all the people crushed under the heavy Roman yoke. "The King of Israel!" they called him. But what sort of king was he?

Today we meet Jesus in Pilate's headquarters in Jerusalem, on trial for his life. What sort of king is arrested and hauled before the authorities to answer a capital charge? The religious authorities in Jerusalem had condemned him because he said he was the Son of God, but Pilate didn't care about that. He didn't care about the religious controversies of his Jewish subjects—that was their business, not his. But he did have the authority to punish sedition, to put down any challenge to the rule of Tiberius Caesar over this restive, rebellious Jewish province.

Nobody believed Jesus was a serious threat to Roman rule. He had no army, and no weapons beyond a token sword or two. If Pilate thought Jesus was a real rebel, his disciples would have been systematically tracked down and crucified alongside him. But as it was, nobody cared about them. Peter and another disciple followed along after Jesus and milled about in the courtyard, where they were recognized, but nobody lifted a finger to take them into custody, because in worldly terms Jesus simply wasn't powerful enough to matter.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" asks Pilate, with a sneer on his face. He doesn't believe it for a minute, but he may have found a way to make the Jewish leaders squirm, to put them in their place, and to press the boot of Rome more firmly down on the neck of their people. Pilate will have Jesus exhibited, bloody and beaten, wearing a rag of a robe and a crown of thorns. He'll display him to the crowd and say, "Here is your king!" This is the best you sorry people can come up with, is what he means to say. This powerless, wretched man is the best alternative you have to the great, majestic, all-powerful Caesar? What a joke he is. What a joke you all are. "King of the Jews" is what he will write on Jesus' cross, as the Jewish authorities moan in protest. They hate it, and so they stammer out, through gritted teeth, "We have no king but the emperor." And Pilate's purpose is achieved. By labeling Jesus the King of the Jews, he humiliates the local authorities and solidifies his own grip on power. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus, testing to see whether he can enlist the prisoner in his little power game.

Jesus' gives two answers. He tells Pilate what kind of king he is not. And then he tells Pilate what kind of king he is.

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says. And here he's not talking about a kingdom that is a physical place you can walk into or out of. He's not saying that he's the ruler of some realm that exists out there, in heaven, out of sight. He's

talking about the origin of the authority he holds. He's talking about where his kingship comes from. It's not rooted in this world. And Jesus explains very clearly what he means by this: "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..." Kingship, authority, power that originates in this world depends on force and violence and domination to establish and maintain itself. Pilate's authority is from this world. Caesar's authority is from this world. He wields power because of his armies and his executioners. The religious authorities, so eager to maintain their position by handing Jesus over to be killed—their power is from this world. But Jesus' kingship does not come from this world. What kind of king is Jesus? He isn't the kind that needs to climb up onto the throne on the backs of innocent victims.

We're tempted, even today, by the lure of power or security that comes from this world. Those who say that there can be no welcome or place of safety offered to the many thousands seeking refuge from violence and war are thinking and reasoning within the confines of the kingdom of this world. They're grasping at a sense of security and invulnerability that comes from shutting out the needy other. And it's understandable. It draws on the assumptions and presuppositions that are built into our worldly institutions. But make no mistake: it's the kingdom of this world talking, not the kingdom of Jesus.

But this zero-sum, you-lose-I-win thinking confronts us in the personal, as well as the political. I'll admit, there are some times I've felt a secret thrill to see someone who hurt me or my friends taken down a peg, put in a compromising or embarrassing position, maybe. And it's not such a great leap from wishing it to actually doing it. But when we build ourselves up at the expense of our neighbors or our enemies, we're also living by a kingship, by a view of power, that comes from this world. It's understandable. It's built into the assumptions and presuppositions all around us about how we relate to enemies and rivals. But it's not the kingdom of Jesus.

Jesus has said what kind of king he is *not*. He has set himself apart from the grasping, scheming kings who buy their power at someone else's expense. But what kind of king is he? What can we expect, if we acknowledge his rule in our lives? Jesus says something else about his kingship. He makes an affirmative claim—he tells us what kind of king he *is*. He says this: "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." Pilate is incredulous, and he can only throw a cynical parting shot over his shoulder as he leaves the room: "What is truth?" For Pilate, who lives in the kingdom of this world, truth is beside the point. Might makes right. The winners write the history books. Truth is what the victors say it is, it's whatever serves their ends. But for Jesus, truth is something different.

You see, Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question, "What is truth?" in words. We don't hear a response that can be spoken. Truth is lived out in Jesus' story. Truth is feeding the hungry multitudes with five loaves and two fish. Truth is stopping the stones of condemnation from flying at a woman caught in adultery. Truth is opening the eyes of a blind man so that he sees for the very first time. Truth is raising a dead man and showing God's power over death itself. Truth is all of these things and what shines so brightly through them—that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, who came not to condemn but to save, not to punish but to heal. Truth is the arms of love stretched wide on a cross. Truth is an empty tomb, a new beginning, the life everlasting. Jesus came to testify to the truth. He came to speak it, to do it, to live it. He is the truth, and the way, and the life.

"Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice," Jesus says. That's the

kind of king he is. Not a king who rules by force or coercion, but a shepherd whose sheep follow him because they know his voice. Their eyes have been opened to see the truth in him and through him. They follow him freely and do what he says, because he has the words of eternal life. What kind of king is Jesus? He's the kind you want to follow, if you've really seen, if you've really glimpsed what his life means. You want to go where he goes, and do what he does.

One of the things I like about being Presbyterian is the way it connects us. It's not just me and my church doing our own thing over here, apart from everybody else. We're part of a bigger family of Christians trying to live out our faith together. It's been heartening over the years to see folks from Highlands take on leadership roles in larger church—most recently Barkley Calkins, Chip and Bobbi Burns, and Debbie Murphy. While our immediate family of churches has seen its share of challenges, by and large their experience has brought them in contact with faithful people who are wrestling with the same struggles we are and finding grace and opportunities for good ministry that touches our communities.

But let's be honest. When we church people do church, all too often we're doing it as though Jesus' kingdom comes from this world. We're preoccupied with budgets and membership and attendance. We try to measure success using the metrics of businesses and other secular organizations. Don't get me wrong... I know that churches are institutions that exist in the world. We have to heat our buildings. We have to pay for the work our staff does. But if we focus our attention on numbers, if we spend all our time at meetings worrying about how we are going to pay the bills, we forget that we have access to a different kind of power. The church's power comes from Jesus, who laid down his life for the life of the world. If we "belong to the truth," as Jesus says, then we hear his voice, we wield the kind of power he wielded—reckless, sacrificial generosity rooted in love. That's the kind of power that shapes our lives and habits, that transforms communities and nations, that gives hope for the future of the world. That's what inspires people to give up their time to serve others. Pilate, Caesar, and all our secular institutions don't have access to that power, the power that transforms a broken world by love and service.

Jesus reigns in the power of love, the love of one who lays down his life for his friends. So let us, the church, hear his voice. Let us live in his kingdom, which is in this world, but not of it. Let Christ rule in our hearts, in our church, in our world. Amen.