

**Christ the King:
We've Heard Pilate, But What Does *Jesus* Say He is?**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 22, 2009.

Christ the King. Christ the King Sunday always puts me in a little quandary, because I love the pomp and the majesty, I love the hymns; I love the idea that Jesus will reign in glory, sitting on a golden throne, ready to judge the living and the dead. TAKE THAT!—all you who wouldn't listen to him when he was alive here on earth proclaiming the reign of God!—and that's the trouble. You see the dilemma of Christ the King? In the contradiction between Jesus of life and ministry and history—the humble healer of our wounds and the savior of the poor--and the Christ of our worship today, I am tempted very easily to move toward the Christ of glory.

In a way, it's a little ironic, given the biblical background of kings in Israel. In biblical times, Israel longed for a king. They only had Judges, but they wanted a king like everybody else. It made them feel inferior to be the only land without a king. But God didn't want them to have a king. They finally ended up with Saul, a defective king if there ever was one. And then they had a whole line of kings, both good and bad, like King Ahab who was the enemy of Elijah; David and Solomon, who got a lot of credit for goodness even when they didn't deserve it; and King Josiah, who is remembered mostly because he was actually a good king—until the very end when they were conquered and they disappeared as a sovereign nation. But Israel never gave up on kingship. The writings of the prophets in exile—like Daniel—told of visions of a great king who would come in glory to save them. When we come to the time of Jesus, the hope for a king, a Messiah, a savior to deliver them from the Romans, or to bring them back to glory as a nation, was as strong as ever. They just didn't want *this* one.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI looked out at the world around him and also wanted a king. Situated as he was between the end of the Great War and the beginning of the Great Depression, he saw a world of political and social instability, a world without real moral authority, in a century when the Church mattered less. Thus, in 1925, when kings were going out of style, the Pope instituted the Feast of Christ the King, hoping to re-direct the course of history, I think, if this feast would make the nations and leaders recognize the authority of the real leader, using a title that always in the past had commanded Respect, and Obedience, and Devotion.

You can't blame Pope Pius for wanting a king. In theory at least, kings are powerful bearers of authority and respect. Today, given our tenuous connections with real kings, the idea of Christ the King may need a little help. After all, we live in a country that was born out of rejecting a king. We may remember kings through stories in our history books, mostly about how ill-behaved many of them were. Or we may remember kings from our favorite fairy tales, or from Disney movies. Kings don't always have a great reputation, or great credibility, or even great visibility. How many

kings can you name in the world today? So we sometimes fudge a little about calling Christ our king.

Today, a thousand pulpits will ring with the message that Jesus, as Christ the King, was not the kind of king that we normally think of. Jesus rode not on a royal horse but on a donkey, and came not to rule but to serve. Sermons will say that he was a king whose crown was made of thorns instead of jewels, and whose throne was a cross to which he was nailed, and his attendants were two criminals nailed next to him. And with this shift of language and meaning, we can say that even though we know of kings as absolute rulers, it is all right to call Jesus a king as long as we understand that he is not a “king” but a “KING.” The trouble is that “king” is an earthly construct, rooted in human reality and associated, quite naturally and rightly, with earthly and political power. And that’s how we come to depend on Pontius Pilate, who knew a little about these things.

Pontius Pilate knows about kings. He asks a quite reasonable question, given that Jesus’ accusers said that Jesus claimed to be king. “Are you a king?” he asks. Jesus has two answers: “Who told you that?” and “You say that I am.” Their conversation is puzzling. Pilate and Jesus talk past each other. They are talking out of different worlds, and using different languages. Words have power, but words are limited. In the world of Pilate, a king is someone who has power over people, who rules alone over a piece of land, and who can generally do what he likes, including make himself rich at the expense of the people under him. Jesus refuses to give in to the premises of this world; he refuses to speak this language. In the world of Jesus, “king” has no meaning because God alone is sovereign, and you can’t confine God in an earthly box with an earthly label.

When we imagine or proclaim Jesus as king, we inhabit the world of Pilate, the world of kings and power. It does no good, really, to fudge by saying that “a true king is a servant” or that “a true king doesn’t have real power” After all, we are using Pilate’s word and trying to squeeze Jesus into it. But why listen to Pilate? Why not listen to Jesus? When Pilate asks “So you are a king?” Jesus says “*You* say that I am.” I come from a different realm, a different reality, he says, not Pilate’s, not earth’s. So let’s listen to Jesus. What is his world? ? And what does *Jesus* say he is?

Jesus shows us another reality—a Gospel reality. In John’s gospel, Jesus says a lot about who he is. John’s gospel contains all the well-known “I AM” sayings of Jesus that made the Jewish leaders to angry, because the sayings with “I AM” reminded them so much of the self-definition of God himself: “I AM,” or “I AM WHO I AM,” God says to Moses when Moses asks for God’s name. In John’s gospel, Jesus says that he is many things, but at no time does he say that he is a king. In fact, after he has fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, the people try to take him by force and make him king, and he escapes from the. Instead of king, Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. He is living water. He is the Bread of life. He is the Light of the world. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is Resurrection and he is Life. And lastly, in this dialogue with Pilate, he says that he is truth. In other words, Jesus is all things that make for life—all things that we need for life. He is not power but life. His words to Pilate sound oddly familiar: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Those

are the words of the Good Shepherd: “I know my own, and my own know me...they will listen to my voice.” That is the Gospel reality.

Does that mean that we need to give up Christ the King? No. Only know that its imagery of kingship reflects our deepest longing to know that God, and God alone, is sovereign over heaven and earth, and that God will finally and definitively be sovereign in this world. The authors of Daniel and Revelation wrote about their visions of what would happen when God comes to finally have dominion over the universe. They wrote in the only language and the only images they knew—the language and images of earth. But I think that the truest image of Christ the King comes from Matthew: “Whoever does this to the least of my people, does it to me.” We will know when the rule of God is finally and definitively here when the least of us are as well fed as the greatest; when the poorest of us can be healed as much as the richest; when the lowest and the worst and the most rejected of us are treated with as much dignity as the highest and the best—the dignity that God created us with—when all of the people of God have what they need to be truly human and to reflect the image of God: shelter, food, work, health, life. This will come from the God of life, whom we today call Christ the King. That’s the Gospel reality that Pilate could never understand and that Jesus tells us. The Good News is that, as Matthew says, we don’t need to wait passively for God to do this for us; the rule of God comes every day whenever we do the work of the God of life, as Christ told us to do. Then we will leave behind the world of Pilate. We welcome the world of Jesus—the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church, and the author of our salvation.