

Christ the King
John 18:33-37
November 25th, 2018
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Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 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?” Jesus answered, “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 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.”

It's the end of the liturgical year. Today is Christ the King Sunday, a day when we might expect readings about heroic triumphs, about the forces of good crushing the forces of evil. We might reasonably expect some satisfying conclusion or climax for our annual spiritual journey.

Instead, we heard the last words of King David from the Second Book of Samuel; the words of an adulterous king who manipulated, abused and lied to his people. We heard a moment from Revelation that we tend to think of as a reference to Jesus coming down from heaven in some distant future. And then we heard a snippet from John's passion story; the same story we hear on Good Friday.

Yet it is exactly the ability of these odd elements to interrupt our expectations and nudge our thinking off-balance that can open us to reconsidering what the reign of Christ really means.

The Franciscans who helped create this feast day reasoned that God, who *transcends* time and creation, gave Jesus into human history as a perfect flesh-and-blood image and likeness of the Divine. The Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate in time and space; Christ, the first-born of all creation. That's how the Franciscans understood the notion of Christ the King.

Pope Pius XI established the feast day in 1925, and then in the 1970s, the church moved the feast from October to the last Sunday before Advent. And now, this feast day celebrates a mystical pivot point, as we end the season of ordinary time and anticipate the season of Advent, when we renew our waiting for the coming of Christ in the nativity.

King David's story from the Second Book of Samuel also involves God's interactions with real flesh-and-blood humans. The divine intent is for earthly

rulers to care for God's people and be stewards of God's justice and mercy. David's behavior makes clear that earthly rulers, even those who are divinely appointed, may not always keep their agreements with God.

In the Psalm we prayed together, we recalled David's oath to God and the promises that King David struggled to keep. And then we gave voice to God's response – a reassurance of God's covenant with David and the children of Israel.

The Psalm is a reminder that *God's* faithfulness, not human loyalty or achievement, is the source and origin of the good, justice and mercy that pass through earthly leadership.

That reminder is expanded in the reading from Revelation. With all due respect to some of our Protestant brothers and sisters, this reading is not a prediction about Jesus coming down to earth to finally take his rightful place as king. For us, Jesus Christ, the incarnated Second Person of the Trinity, was already king at his resurrection and ascension. More surprising, Jesus Christ was already king at his birth.

The reading from Revelation is an image of Jesus Christ's return to the fullness of the Trinity that transcends time. The direction of travel, if you will, is not from heaven to earth at some later date. Rather it was and is from earth to heaven; it was and is a reunion of the created world of time with the timeless truth of God's heaven. It is a joyful confirmation of God's realm dancing with creation and the ultimate sovereignty of the One God "who is and who was and who is to come."

With those readings as background, we come to John's Jesus, standing before a proconsul of the Roman Empire, a ruler of this world. Caiaphas, the High Priest, had interrogated him the night before and so Jesus has been accused by both political leaders and the religious authorities working with them.

Scourged and crowned with thorns, Jesus stands before Pilate, who says: "You are the King of the Judaeans?" Jesus responds with a challenge, and maybe a little sarcasm, asking whether Pilate is personally interested or just repeating palace gossip. Pilate is uncharacteristically restrained. "Am I a Judean? Your nation and your chief priests handed you over to me; what have

you done?” As spineless a Roman toady as he was, Pilate may be genuinely curious.

Now, John’s Jesus understands himself to be one who witnesses to the truth about God, rather than one bringing the kingdom of God or fulfilling the law as in the synoptic Gospels. And so, Jesus answers Pilate with a statement of truth that Pilate surely misunderstood.

“My kingdom is not of this kosmos,” Jesus says. “If my kingdom were of this kosmos, my subjects would have struggled so that I should not be handed over to the Judeans; but for now, my kingdom is not from here.”

Now, remember the reassurance of God’s covenant and faithfulness, and the confirmation of God’s sovereignty from our other readings. These help us to see that Jesus is not saying that the kingdom of God is some pure, other realm where those who never broke their promises with God will be gathered and the rest will be left to stew in their own juices.

Jesus is not talking about the *location* of God’s realm, he is describing the *character* of the kingdom that God rules, its source and its strength. God’s realm is not governed and spread by violence or Jesus’ subjects would have reacted violently.

Instead, God’s realm is increased and nurtured by *truth*. “For now,” Jesus says, “my kingdom is not from here.” It will come and it will come on earth as in heaven precisely because it is about truth; the truth of the alpha and the omega, who is and who was and who is coming.

Pilate does not know what to do with that. How can there be a kingdom without violence, without scape-goating and without exclusion? Scrambling for any clarity that makes sense to him, all Pilate can say is: “Are you then a king?”

Recognizing Pilate’s limited imagination, Jesus says: “You say that I am a king,” as if he knows that the world will not be able to grasp his truth until after the crucifixion, after the resurrection and after the ascension. And then, maybe we will be able to turn again to the nativity with fresh eyes.

“I was born for this,” Jesus says to Pilate, “and for this I have come into the kosmos: that I might testify to the truth; everyone who belongs to the truth hearkens to my voice.”

John's Jesus understands himself to *be* the truth, the Logos of God made flesh, who was in the cosmos in the origin though the cosmos did not recognize him. Because of his incarnation, God's love has revealed itself all the way to the cross and beyond. God's truth incarnated in Jesus and bears witness to itself.

Christ is king because Christ is God's truth, brought to us, attested to and celebrated in the heavens.

The great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner said this: "The self-revealing truth of God's faithfulness, of [God's] saving mercy, stands there in the person of Jesus: accused, scourged, crowned with thorns, soon to be pierced by the lance of this world. There is God's truth and [God's] reality, exposing itself to such a fate, bearing triumphant witness to itself by submitting to the humiliation which the lying world holds in store for it."

"Are you then a king?" Pilate asks Jesus. "Yes," those who can hear God's truth are able to say, "just not in the way this world habitually thinks." What we are accustomed to is living within systems that perpetuate violence in cycles where victims become perpetrators and perpetrators become victims. Systems where we project our own shortcomings and fears outward onto people who are not like ourselves. Or we turn violence inward upon ourselves because we do not look or think or feel like others that we imagine will finally accept us if only we could grind away what makes us different. And where we create and follow earthly rulers who are literally hell-bent on control.

Christ is vastly different kind of king. Christ is a king who becomes the forgiving victim rather than deflecting victimization away onto another. Christ is a king ruling from a position of loving vulnerability, sometimes as powerless as a newborn infant.

Christ is a king who has endured human suffering for the purpose of carrying all human suffering into the heart of the Trinity. And there, "Jesus the Anointed, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings on earth," experiences all our suffering with us as well as any desires for retribution, and bathes them all in liberating, reconciling love.

There in the heart of the Trinity that beats right here among us, we are reunited with the alpha and the omega, "the one who is and who was and who is coming." Can you hear the voice of God's truth calling you home?

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