

Sermon for The Reign of Christ the King—Year B 2018
Is Jesus King or Not?

Today is the final Sunday of the church year—the Sunday on which the church celebrates the feast of “Christ the king.”

This “feast” is relatively new to the church calendar having been instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

During the 1920s, the Pope saw the ascendancy of nationalism in Europe as a denial of Christ as king.

He viewed with alarm the rise of dictatorships—Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, Stalin in Russia—to name only a few.

The peoples of Europe were captivated by the allure of their autocratic leaders.

Sadly, such observations about the allure of autocratic leaders is just as relevant today as it was in 1925.

By ending the church year with a confession of Christ as King, we remind ourselves that history has an end and the end is Jesus.

The day will come, the apostle Paul tells us, when “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

And yet . . . we must take care in proclaiming Jesus king.

As points out to Pilate, his “kingdom is not from this world.”

That does not mean that the kingdom of God is somewhere other than here and now.

Rather, it means that the reign of God is not synonymous with government as we know it.

It is not imposed by the consent of the governed, by rule of law, by force of arms or by any other coercive means.
God's sovereignty is of a different order.
God rules the world through the power of God's word spoken through the prophets, the apostles, and in the fullness of time, in and through his Son.
God's weapon is the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit working repentance, faith, and reconciliation in, with, and through us.
God overcomes the world by loving the hell out of it.

So, this week we pause to reflect on the meaning of Christ's reign over the Church, the world, and our own lives.

What kind of king is Jesus?

What does his rule look and feel like?

What does it mean to live and thrive under his kingship?

And to ask the question:

If Jesus is king, then who or what is *not*?

To guide our reflection,

we have this rather odd, unexpected passage from the gospel of John.

How do we get to see Jesus in his kingly glory?

Transfigured and dazzling on the mountaintop, perhaps?

Or rising from the waters of baptism

with heaven thundering in his ears?

Or performing one of his more spectacular miracles

in front of an adoring crowd?

No, we don't get to see Jesus as king

in any of those majestic guises.

Instead, the gospel of John offers us Jesus

at his physical and emotional worst:

arrested, disheveled, harassed, hungry, abandoned,

sleep-deprived and standing before

the notoriously cruel Pontius Pilate for questioning.

Now if I were going to write Jesus into a kingly scene,
this would not be the one I'd write.

But if there is any story about Jesus can smack all smugness out of us—
all arrogance, superiority, gleefulness and scorn—
surely this one has to be it.

Our king is an arrested, falsely-accused criminal.

A dead man walking.

His chosen path to glory is humility, surrender,
brokenness, and loss.

“Are you the King of the Jews,” Pilate asks Jesus.

Apparently, Pilate was also wondering what kind of king is this.

In fact, what Pilate really wants to know is if Jesus
is a threat to his identity, his power, his rule.

“What have you done,” he inquires.

Behind that question lay his real concern.

“Have you upset the status quo I seek to maintain?

Are you changing the usual way of doing business and life—
our beliefs, our values, our relationships?”

(After all . . . if Jesus *is* king, who or what is not?)

Whether spoken or unspoken,

conscious or unconscious,

these concerns get triggered every time we encounter the gospel

but also when we encounter another person,

or a different idea or belief,

a new decision or even that might affect us.

Like Pilate we want to know

what we have to do in order to defend our status quo—

which is usually keeping ourselves as sovereigns in our worlds.

We do not want someone to mess with our self-identity,

our values, our beliefs, and our opinions.

They should not question our understanding of God, self, others or the world.
And we certainly do not want them taking away our power, our privilege, our control, or our comfort.
We have worked hard to build that kingdom and we do not want someone coming along making changes. Even (or maybe especially) if that someone is Jesus himself.

And yet Sunday after Sunday – and perhaps daily— that is exactly what we ask for.
We ask that all these very systems would be changed.
As we together or alone, whenever we pray “thy kingdom come” we are saying thy kingdom in which you are king—
thy kingdom of love and compassion—
thy kingdom of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation—
thy kingdom of justice and concern for the poor—
thy kingdom of humility, surrender, and self-giving—
thy kingdom of peace and holiness.
Thy kingdom come.
We are praying that God might rule in our hearts, our lives, and our world.
We are asking for change—
We are asking that this world, our lives, and our relationships might be different.

If Jesus *is* king, who or what is not?

If we really mean that prayer—“thy kingdom come”— then we need to allow God to answer that prayer in how we live and in how we speak.
The status quo must go.
If Jesus is king, then we are not.

If Jesus is king, then other systems and structures of power in this world are neither the first nor the final voice to which we listen. They do not determine our decisions about who we are, who others are, and how we relate with them.

If we truly mean “thy kingdom come,” then we must also pray, “our kingdom go.”

Our kingdom of power, domination, and greed must go.

Our kingdom of violence and oppression must go.

Our kingdom of fear, prejudice, and resentment must go.

Our kingdom of judgment and labeling must go.

Our kingdom of individualism and indifference to the plight of others must go.

We can no longer defend the kingdom of status quo.

In defending our kingdoms, we tend to live as if the truth belongs to us. We live as if we know the mind of God, and, therefore, we know what is right and best, who is in and who is out.

And in that moment . . .

Jesus is no longer our king

because we are no longer listening to the voice of Jesus.

We have become as deaf as Pilate.

The truth does not belong to us.

Instead, we are to belong to the truth.

Only then will we be able to hear and listen to Jesus’ voice.

If Jesus *is* king, who or what is not?

The reign of Christ the King frees us to step outside the status quo and not just live in a new kingdom but to be and become a new kingdom—the Kingdom of God.

If Christ is our King then the status quo must fall.
If Christ is our King, we surrender to him, to his truth.
The kind of truth Jesus calls us to belong to,
the truth he embodies in his life, death and resurrection
that is not arrogant, scornful or superior.
A truth that does not serve to bolster his own power or authority.
Quite the opposite—he surrenders and is humbled by it.
It takes away his life.

If Jesus *is* king, who or what is not?

Jesus didn't secure his own prosperity
at the expense of other people's suffering.
He didn't allow holy ends to justify debased means.
He didn't make honesty optional when the truth was inconvenient.
And he never aligned himself with brute,
dishonest power to guarantee his own success.
This is our king.

Can we stand for the truth as he does?
Can we belong to the truth as he does?
Can we tell and keep telling the beautiful,
hard, cutting, joy-filled, pain-filled,
powerfully undeniable stories we know to be true
about this Jesus, whose very identity is Truth?
Can we surrender our kingdom to his?

If Jesus *is* king, who or what is not?

Soon, we will enter into Advent,
a season of waiting, longing, and listening.
Soon we will walk into the expectant darkness,
waiting for the light to dawn,
for the Truth to reveal himself,
for the first cries of a vulnerable baby
to redefine kingship, authority, and power forever.
This is our hope.
The king who reigns will not abandon us.
He is our alpha and omega, our beginning and our end.
He is the one who was, who is, and who is to come.
And we belong to him.
Thanks be to God forevermore.