

Sunday, November 25, 2018

Christ the King (Year B)

Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1.4b-8; John 18.33-38

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Yes, Pilate, what IS truth? More on that in a few moments.

Today, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. The commemoration of Christ the King is a relatively new celebration in the Church calendar. It was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the increasingly secular world and the growing number of non-Christian empires. This was an attempt by the Church to reinforce the fact that there was a true king who reigns over all Creation—even the secular, non-Christian governments of the world. That this world is indeed not theirs but Christ's. Following the Second Vatican Council, the feast of Christ the King was moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, emphasizing the eschatological majesty of Christ as we head into Advent, with its themes of the coming of Christ, both at his birth and at the end of the ages. Some Protestant denominations, including our own Anglican tradition, have adopted the feast of Christ the King as a reminder that our allegiance is to our spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly powers.

All of our readings for today carry the theme, directly or indirectly, of Christ as our heavenly king. Both the readings from Daniel, read from a Christian perspective, and from Revelation, depict Christ as our heavenly ruler in an eschatological age—at the end of the ages. As Daniel tells us, “To him is given dominion and glory and kingship . . . His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” (Dan 7.14). And Revelation states that Christ is “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” who is given “glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev 1.5, 6).

But Christ's reign is not just something we await, set to begin at some unknown future point in time. Rather, by virtue of being the Son of God resurrected and ascended into heaven, he is our King even now. We are able to infer this from Daniel and Revelation, as well as other references in Scripture. But in our reading from the Gospel According to John, Jesus himself is somewhat mysterious about the subject of kingship when interrogated by Pontius Pilate.

A major point of Pilate's interrogation is Jesus' royal status. Which makes sense. The Temple authorities have found Jesus guilty of blasphemy. Unable to administer the death penalty themselves, they remanded Jesus over to the Roman authorities for a civil trial on charges that in claiming to be the Messiah, a king, Jesus had committed treason against the Roman Empire. A crime punishable by death. Let Pilate do their dirty work.

What we witness in this trial is a somewhat convoluted going round and round about whether Jesus really is a king. Pilate asks Jesus “Are you the King of the Jews?” (Jn 18.33). Jesus gives a bit of a tentative non-answer, almost denying the charges. “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” (Jn 18.34) Pilate then lays out the charges brought by the Temple authorities, to which Jesus gives a cryptic response: “My kingdom is not from this world” (Jn

18.36). Okay, so if his kingdom is not of this world, is he a king or not? Having a kingdom implies being a king. But not being of this world, it could not be a real kingdom, could it? Certainly not one that would be a viable threat to the Roman Emperor. It calls into question whether this is even a treasonable offense. Pilate then bluntly asks: “So you are a king?” (Jn 18.37a). If Jesus says “yes,” it’s treason. If he says “no,” then there is no justification for the charges levied by the Temple authorities. Rather, Jesus responds in a way that is even more convoluted. “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world” (Jn 18.37b). In other words, Jesus effectively says the charges are hearsay, but then implies that his whole purpose is to fulfill the role of a king. In one statement, Jesus seems to at the same time imply denial of kingship while also affirming his kingship. At this point, Pilate’s mind is probably spinning, trying to sort out the legal ramifications of what Jesus has said. So Pilate chooses to abrogate his civic responsibilities and lets the crowd decide Jesus’ fate.

While the testimony provided in this scene seems a bit convoluted, one that would make any attorney on Law and Order scratch their head, this interrogation provides a critical lesson in the nature of Jesus’ kingship. “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” (Jn 18.37).

In John’s gospel, the story of Jesus before Pontius Pilate presents two differing views of how to exercise power: through force or with love. Pilate views the possibility of Jesus’ kingship as purely political. If Jesus does claim to be a king, there are serious political ramifications. One claiming to be a king would be denying allegiance to the Emperor and would, in fact, be implicitly posing a challenge to the authority of the Emperor. An opposition that would be viewed as a form of force, particularly if acted upon. It is ultimately this political understanding of kingship that will get Jesus killed.

The interrogation ends with Pilate asking that enigmatic, yet poignant question, “What is truth?” (Jn 18.38). Little did he know that the truth lay in Jesus’ statement that his kingdom is not from this world. In John’s gospel, Jesus’ kingship is a theological statement that redefines the world’s understanding of power. Jesus’ power comes from God, not from political wrangling, military might, or human institutions. It is a power based not on force, but on love. Love for all of God’s Creation. In saying, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (Jn 18.37), Jesus is providing his own definition of kingship. A definition that is based on some broader truth of what this world is about. A definition based on something far broader and of greater significance than mere politics. A definition that transcends politics. A definition that, if taken seriously, would serve to abolish politics. No wonder Jesus’ kingship was—and still is—such a threat.

This concept of truth is integral to Jesus’ understanding of his role as king. Indeed, this concept of truth is fundamental to John’s understanding and portrayal of who Jesus is. Pointing, from the very beginning, that Jesus is king. That Jesus is a different kind of king. In the Prologue to John’s gospel, we hear “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1.14). A foretelling of just what kind of person, what kind of king, Jesus—the Word made flesh—would be. Jesus seeks to demonstrate this truth throughout his earthly ministry. To express that truth in his teachings. To tangibly demonstrate that truth in his actions. Through miracles, through healings, through

casting out of demons, through his attempts to correct the Temple authorities, through his embracing all who are marginalized. By living the truth of what matters most to God—the care of “the least of these brothers and sisters.” And then, at the Last Supper on the night he was arrested and taken before Pilate, Jesus verbally expresses this truth not only in his actions, but in his very being. That he embodies this truth, when he tells his disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14.6).

While he may seem completely powerless as he stands before Pilate, Jesus is the only one who knows the true meaning of power and where it comes from. That it ultimately is found in the love of God. The love of God put into action, as Jesus himself demonstrated during his life and ministry. The love that Jesus demonstrated even as he hung on the cross. The love that Jesus demonstrated as he died for the sins of all.

Of course, Jesus is unlike any king the world has ever seen. The events of his life are not consistent with the image of kingship. Born in a lowly manger. His ministry as an itinerant preacher devoted to healing the sick and infirmed, and of serving the poor and the marginalized. And certainly the manner of his death—crucified on a cross like a common criminal. But in the manner of his life, and in his death, Jesus nonetheless exemplifies the character of true kingship, and in so doing, redefines our worldly assumptions about power and authority. That true power and authority are borne out of God’s love for humanity and what that love can accomplish if properly exercised.

In John’s gospel, “truth” is the portrayal of God’s reality and vision for humanity as seen through and as witnessed in God’s revelation of himself through Christ and in his actions of redemption and reconciliation of humanity to himself. Actions that were only able to occur through the person of Jesus Christ. No, Jesus was nothing like an earthly king. Yet, his authority comes from the truth to which he bears witness. His kingship is upheld by those of us who see the truth in his words and actions, and who listen and choose to follow him as our king.

We generally think of kings as having absolute authority over their subjects. Most Americans have no experience of anyone having absolute control over their lives. In fact, we pride ourselves on our “rugged individualism,” that we answer to no one. For the most part, anyway. That is our understanding of freedom. And in our society, we feel this is a God-given right, one that we are entitled to. As such, this makes the vision of Christ the King seem a bit odd to us. And this notion of exercising our own perceived sense of freedom at the expense of others merely serves to perpetuate the ills of the world. What John perceives as a world in darkness. A world that shuts God out and is not open to receiving the light of the world that is Jesus Christ.

But we must recognize that “In Jesus there is no personal vanity or desire for aggrandizement at the expense of others. He came to serve and not to be served. His Kingdom would create a new community of believers who would hear and obey his voice. Jesus rules through grace and love in a realm of spirit and life in which justice and peace shine out for all. This was the saving truth that was being offered to the whole world in our crucified Lord, and is the essential meaning of our proclaiming *Christ as King*” (Synthesis, Christ the King, 11/25/18). That Christ’s reign, wherein we follow his example, will end the domination of evil and lead the world towards love, justice, peace, and abundance.

As theologian Michaela Bruzzese so aptly put it, “Traditional kings demand allegiance and servitude, but . . . Jesus is about liberation—from suffering, sickness and even death, exclusion, persecution, and our own egos and selfishness. This is one who serves the least of these, and who finally gives his body and blood so that others may live. Understood this way, we not only rejoice in the concept of Christ as king but we understand it as fundamental to our discipleship” (*Synthesis Today* email, 11/21/18).

As we prepare to begin a new liturgical year, let us take some time to reflect on where our allegiances have been in this past year. Who has been the true king of our hearts, our minds, our lives? Let today’s celebration of Christ the King serve as an invitation, an opportunity, to turn again to Christ. To enthrone in our own hearts and minds Christ as our Lord and our King.