

**Sunday, November 24, 2024**  
**Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King (Proper 29B)**

John 18.33-37

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1256068102368843>

*(Sermon begins at about 21:00)*

**“Reclaiming Our King”**

“Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’” This is the first interaction between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, the Emperor’s representative in the far-off land of Palestine. This is the first time Pilate has spoken to Jesus. At this point, Pilate only knows what he has heard from others. Namely, the temple authorities. Prior to this encounter, Pilate and the temple authorities have debated who has jurisdiction over Jesus and his alleged crimes. Pilate views this as a local matter which the temple authorities need to resolve. Wanting to be rid of Jesus, yet not having the authority to issue a direct death sentence, the temple authorities devise a scheme to push Jesus off into Pilate’s jurisdiction. While Pilate’s encounter with temple authorities (before the scene we hear today) does not specifically state as such, the implication based on Pilate’s question of Jesus is that the temple authorities threw down the gauntlet. They said the magic words: “This man claims to be King of the Jews.” This would imply that Jesus is at the very least a rabble-rouse if not an outright insurrectionist. If this allegation is true, then such a claim would be considered an act of treason against the Empire, placing Jesus solidly under Pilate’s jurisdiction.

What ensues is Pilate’s attempt to get at the truth about Jesus’ alleged kingship. For Pilate, Jesus’ kingship is political, and if determined to be true, to be an act of treason. Punishable by death. For Jesus, a non-citizen of Rome, death by crucifixion. What Pilate—a quintessential functionary of a militaristic empire—fails to understand is Jesus’ kingship is not political, but is theological. His kingship is not derived from military might or human institutions, but rather directly from God. Which is effectively what Jesus is trying to explain to Pilate: “My kingdom is not from this world.” And then after more back and forth, “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.” Pilate just doesn’t get it. How could he? He and Jesus are operating out of completely different frames of reference. They might as well be speaking completely different languages. Pilate is thinking in purely political and militaristic terms. Jesus is speaking theologically, using the same imagery that is commonly used for God, his Father: that of kingship.

As we know from what follows in John’s Gospel—in all the Gospels—this getting hung up on the image of king; Pilate and Jesus having different understandings of kingship; is what leads to Jesus being found guilty of treason. Punishable by death. As if to use this false claim of kingship to his advantage, to Rome’s advantage, Pilate then makes a mockery of the claims of kingship. He does this by having Jesus dressed in a purple robe with a crown of thorns, and publicly presented as a king. He even has an inscription placed above Jesus’ head on the cross: “Jesus of

Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Certainly not because Pilate believes Jesus is a real king. It’s not even certain he believes the claims of the temple authorities. But being an opportunist, Pilate uses the current allegations—regardless of whether true or false—to send a message: that anyone claiming to be king will meet the same fate. Sending a powerful message that Rome is in complete control and no resistance will be tolerated. From anyone, be they commoner or would-be king.

For the Church, this image of Christ as King makes perfect sense. And even within secular society for a large part of the Church’s history. Once Christianity was legalized under another king, the Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century, the image of Christ as King made sense in a more secular context, as well. And so it was throughout much of the intervening time between then and now, when the only form of governance was monarchy. In fact, the image of Christ as King was probably a comfort. Particularly to those who lived under ruthless and tyrannical kings. As Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Knowledge that those who lived under oppression, were ultimately subject to a King who had even greater authority than their corrupt earthly kings. Knowledge that they were ultimately subject to a King who came not to be served but to serve. Knowledge that, even if one’s earthly king was only concerned with himself, with his wealth and power, the ultimate King was only concerned for others, particularly those who are poor or marginalized.

Although as time marched on toward the present, forms of governance evolved. Humanity developed more benevolent and compassionate forms of governance. Particularly those that focused less on the divine right of kings and absolute authority and more on authority vested with the people: the rise of more democratic and representative forms of governance. Certainly our own nation being one of the early experiments in such forms of government. Although, even then, as we have seen in our own history, there remains the potential for some to seek to manipulate the institutions and instruments of even the most democratic of societies to their own purposes. With the goal of making themselves as kings of old. And often resulting in greater focus on the State, eclipsing the emphasis on and influence of the Church.

It was conditions such as these that first resulted in the Church establishing the Feast of Christ the King. The designation of this day as Christ the King Sunday is fairly recent, only having been instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925—a mere 99 years ago. This was in response to increasing secularism, ultra-nationalism, and authoritarianism following World War I. A time not unlike the one we find ourselves in currently. The intent of Christ the King Sunday was to remind the faithful that, while living in the secular world, our ultimate authority is not the State, but God. Our ultimate authority is not a president or a monarch or a dictator, but rather Christ the King. And that our priorities are to be aligned accordingly. The priorities that are outlined in the teachings of Holy Scripture. Most notably the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The priorities that are most eloquently summarized in the Great Commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. The priorities that are further emphasized in our own baptismal covenant: to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

We have just come through an election that was characterized by a shift to the right politically. While there are many reasons for this shift, among the primary motivators is a rise in nationalist and populist sentiments among a portion of the electorate. And this is not just happening in our own nation. Over the last couple of years, we have seen similar shifts in many other places around the globe, including among some of our allies. Some of the very same shifts that were prominent post-World War I when Pope Pius instituted the Feast of Christ the King as an attempted corrective. At that time, one of the areas of concern, in addition to nationalism and authoritarianism, was an accompanying rise in secularism. A moving away from the Church by more and more people. Then, as now, we are seeing a rise in secularism, as indicated by the decline in membership in all mainline denominations, including our own. Although interestingly, we are also seeing an equally troublesome movement within the religious sphere: a rise in Christian nationalism. The belief that the United States as a nation is defined by Christianity, as viewed through a rigid and literalist interpretation of Scripture, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. In other words, that the government should define what we as Christians believe. The attempt to legitimize nationalistic and authoritarian sentiments under the guise of the Church, through a perversion of the Gospel. A very dangerous combination, to be sure. Particularly for anyone who is not a straight white male. A desire for a return to the early days of our nation where only wealthy white men had any rights, any voice, in matters secular or sacred.

In some quarters of the Church, there has been a push-back against the commemoration of Christ the King. A knee-jerk reaction to the language of monarchy, particularly in our own democratic republic, which fought to obtain freedom from a tyrannical monarch. But given what we are witnessing in our own nation and around the world, perhaps more than ever we need to be reminded of the importance of Christ the King—of Christ as our King. To be reminded of why this feast day was established in the first place. To remind us that, as Christians, we have dual citizenship. We may be citizens of the United States, either by circumstance of birth, or by choice for those born under a foreign flag but who have become a naturalized citizen. At the same time, by virtue of our baptisms, by virtue of our being incorporated into the Body of Christ, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Yes, as citizens of this nation, we have a responsibility to abide by the Constitution and the laws of this land. But as members of the Body of Christ, we have a greater responsibility to abide by the laws established by God long before this nation was even conceived. As citizens of this nation, we have a responsibility to obey the lawful direction of our duly elected leaders. As members of the Body of Christ, we have an even greater responsibility to obey a leader ordained by God from the beginning of the Creation. A leader who is God in the flesh: Jesus Christ.

Given what we are seeing in the world around us, particularly the increased secularization of the world and the influence that is having on our collective society, its values and norms; given what we are seeing as attempts to co-opt our religion and reshape it into something that is both a perversion of the Gospel and a functionary of the State, we have a responsibility to take action. Both as citizens of this country that we love, and as citizens of the Church that we love. To reclaim and reaffirm the true and ultimate authority in our lives. To reclaim Christ as our King.