

Sunday Lesson – November 21, 2021

GOSPEL: John 18: 33-37

“Christ the King”

Context

“Who is truly powerful? Who reigns?



John’s trial narrative raises these questions in compelling ways. Although Pilate and the Jewish leaders may appear to be powerful, John presents Jesus as the one who exercises authority.

The charge of kingship is the central question of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Jesus never answers Pilate’s question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18:33), in a straightforward way. As in other parts of the Gospel, John communicates some of the most important messages about Jesus’ identity by enacting them in the story instead of stating them outright. Here, John uses the trial and crucifixion to display Jesus’ kingship and the faithlessness of those who reject him.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king-2/commentary-on-john-1833-37-3)*

Insight

“Part of the irony of John’s presentation of the trial and crucifixion is that Pilate uses his own authority to declare Jesus’ kingship. Pilate places an inscription over the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” (John 19:19). The chief priests protest, asking Pilate to clarify that this was only what Jesus claimed. But Pilate refuses their request with a solemn pronouncement, “What I have written, I have written” (19:22).

In this way, John crafts his narrative so that Jesus’ kingship becomes most visible in his crucifixion. It is as if his crucifixion is his enthronement as king, the moment at which the declaration of his kingship is made public. Although all four Gospels record the inscription over the cross (cf. Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26;

Luke 23:38), only John adds the extra details about Pilate’s interaction with the chief priests regarding the saying. John crafts the story so that the reader, who has known from John 1:49 that Jesus is “King of Israel,” sees Jesus’ kingship enacted even against the protests of the Jewish leaders.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king-2/commentary-on-john-1833-37-3)*

Gospel Reading

“Pilate went back into the palace and called for Jesus. He said, “Are you the ‘King of the Jews?’” Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you this about me?” Pilate said, “Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?” My kingdom,” said Jesus, “doesn’t consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king. Then Pilate said, “So, are you a king or not?” Jesus answered, “You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.” The Message

What It Could Mean?

“So much in John’s Gospel turns on questions. Have you ever noticed that? How frequently John records questions, whether from Jesus or the person to whom Jesus is talking. From the first chapter with Nathaniel, through Nicodemus and the woman at the well, including multiple encounters with religious authorities, and all the way up to this passage, Jesus is regularly asking or answering questions.

Which is just what is happening, I think, in today’s reading. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus says, “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

What does this mean? So this isn't exactly Pilate's question, but it's close. Instead, Pilate answers, "So you are a king?"

And with this question Pilate gets to the heart of his concern. Pilate, quite frankly, doesn't really care if Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. He's interested in whether Jesus is a potential political threat, a potential opponent. Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world,"--Pilate needs to know what Jesus means by that.

To tell you the truth, I think we should be interested in that question as well. What does it mean for our daily work, relationships, future plans and more to say that Jesus is King.

What does it mean for us not simply to name Jesus as king but to actually expect Jesus to exercise reign over our lives? To submit to his rule? What does it mean not simply to call Jesus "Lord" but to give him lordship – authority – over our lives.

But part of it might also be that as modern/post-modern, relatively affluent first-world citizens we find the idea of submitting to anything or anyone a little hard to imagine, if not downright offensive. We can talk about Jesus being "Lord" with some modicum of eloquence, but when push comes to shove, we'd prefer to make our own decisions, thank you very much, about how we spend our time, energy, and money. Convinced of our own autonomy and independence, we are grateful that Jesus is Lord... as long as he doesn't actually demand any significant or sacrificial allegiance. Until....

The point of proclaiming the rule and reign of Christ is not to verbally give some form of allegiance or offer some form of submission, as if the Christ who did not equate equality with God as something to be exploited (Phil 2) was mostly interested in a making a power play. Rather, when we confess Jesus as king and inviting the reign of Christ, we are praying that Jesus' rule of peace and justice and equity and equality would come... also to us. That we might be a part of it. That we might share the wonder of that reign with others, participate in it, feel it made real and actualized in our own live, and experience the joy that

comes from being caught up in and aligned with the purposes of God.

Our opportunity perhaps is to help our people imagine not just Jesus as a different kind of king than we usually imagine – though that is also helpful – but to invite our people into the reign of Christ now, to help them see their works of compassion and care as being caught up in Christ's rule now, to remind them that God's kingdom comes on its own whether we pray for it or not and we get to be a part of that as it comes also to us.

Christ the King – what does this mean? That we are drawn into a different way of being, here and now, equipped to love and serve with joy, to confess with candor, to recommit ourselves to the healing of the world with confidence. Because the kingdom of God is coming...on its own...even now, and we get to be part of that. Thanks be to God. And thanks be to God for all those who proclaim this message." (*Excerpts from davidlose.net/2018/11/christ-the-king-b-what-does-this-mean/*)

Readings for Further Study

- Luke 23: 2-5 "Are you this King of the Jews..."
- Romans 14:17 "The Kingdom of God...is of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"
- Hebrews 13:14; Philippians 3:20; 1 John 2: 15-17 We are citizens of heaven

Thought for the Day

"God's love is the most awesome thing about Him. It is not His justice, nor His majesty, nor even His blazing holiness, but the fact that He has made and keeps a covenant of personal commitment and love to His people." ~ Sinclair B. Ferguson

A Prayer

"Sovereign God, ruler of all creation, you sent Jesus to testify to the truth: that you alone are the Lord of life. Help us to listen always to his voice so that we may proclaim his realm of justice, peace, and endless love; through Christ, who reigns forever."

Amen.