

November 21, 2021

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John 18:33-37

<sup>33</sup>Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" <sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" <sup>35</sup>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?" <sup>36</sup>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." <sup>37</sup>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."

This Sunday we observe Christ the King, sometimes known as the Reign of Christ, Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church year, followed next Sunday by the First Sunday in Advent.

For most people in the United States, the idea of a King or Queen doesn't really mean much to us, other than in fairy tales. It's outside our experience. Growing up in the Detroit area and watching Canadian television, I think of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and of 13 more independent nations, totaling around 128 million people. It seems like being king or queen would be a good thing.

I was surprised to learn, though, that if you want job security, you shouldn't become a king or queen. Although Queen Elizabeth has been Queen for 69 years now, she is an exception.

Looking back over history, historians estimate that the average length of a reign for a king or queen is only about 4 years. And for the most part, royalty has had a violent, murderous history throughout the centuries.

Since the earliest days of the church, Jesus has been given the title "King of Kings." In St. Luke's gospel, Jesus is pictured as a king even before he was born. When the angel Gabriel informs Mary that she will bear a son named Jesus he adds, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of this ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Later, the Wise Men – the Magi – ask "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

In St. Mark's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry by saying that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near." The very core of Jesus' message is the coming of the kingdom – or the reign – of God.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time, the people gather in the streets and see him as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah which said, "Behold your King is coming." The crowds wave palm branches and shout out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!" Jesus purposely enters the city in a way that says he is different than what they are expecting. He insists on entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, which was considered to be a sign of reconciliation and peace.

As the events unfold in Jerusalem, ending with Jesus' crucifixion, he is hailed or mocked as a king several times. In the final hours before his crucifixion, Jesus is interrogated by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor.

Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus answers him with another question. "Do you ask me this on your own or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate then asks, "What have you done?"

Jesus answers him: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But, my kingdom is not from here."

Pilate must have been both confused and infuriated. Jesus and his followers didn't really pose any kind of real threat to the Roman Empire, but Pilate was supposed to be in control, not Jesus.

So, probably thinking he has trapped Jesus with his words, he asks, "So, you are king?"

Jesus says, "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."

For Pilate, Jesus must have seemed very strange or unlike any King he had ever known. The truth is, Jesus was and is, a unique king, who reigns over a unique kingdom.

Jesus is a servant king. Jesus is not a king who rules through power, greed, or manipulation at the expense of others. He didn't conscript an army to dominate the hearts and minds of people by force. He lived and modeled a different style of leadership.

Jesus' reign as king is revealed in humility, self-emptying, service to others, and it is revealed through love. According to the world's standards, Jesus is a very strange king, one who serves, one who heals, one who lifts up those who are bowed down.

Pontius Pilate was a man of power and authority. He presided over disputes. He sentenced many to death. His goals in life were survival, control, and advancement. Pilate governed his territory with confidence...through threats, through rules, through force.

Jesus, rules his territory...the whole cosmos...through self-sacrifice and love.

Jesus was born to testify to truth. And that truth is the truth of God's love for us. The truth of God's love for us can be seen so clearly in Jesus death and resurrection. It is the truth of God's love for us...a love from which we can never be separated because of Jesus.

The people of Israel hoped and prayed for a strong and powerful king, who would conquer everyone with military might. But instead, the Messiah, the King of Kings, was born as a powerless, little baby to an unimportant family in an unimportant town.

While Kings normally have servants who wait on them hand and foot, our King served others. Jesus got down on his hands and knees and washed his disciples feet.

While Kings are removed from the common people, our King reached out and touched everyone, including those society had tossed aside.

Our King was so different that he gave his very own life by dying on the cross for you and for me. It is his love that changes us.

What does it mean to make the claim that Christ is King? It implies a lifestyle based on his ways...the way of servanthood and the way of love. That is what ultimately rules. We do what love demands no matter how foolish it may seem, or how economically unfeasible, or politically incorrect. In fact, we do what love demands even when it is risky. We serve others, help them, associate with them even when we don't want to, because we have been changed by Christ's love.

In the United Kingdom and Canada, those who work in public service, do so on behalf of the Crown, on behalf of the Monarch. Police officers, fire fighters, paramedics, the military, even postal workers, all have a crown displayed on their uniforms. The crown on their uniforms reminds them and it reminds the public that they serve on behalf of the Crown, on behalf of Queen Elizabeth.

You and I, baptized Christians, also bear the mark of our King. For we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.

My friends, as we end this church year, we remember that there are many in the world today, many in our communities, many maybe in our own families, who are in need of the love of Christ. We have come to God's Word, hungry for Christ and Christ provides. Now we are sent for action, to be about Christ's love and service in the world.

We are loved by a King who conquered death and the grave forever and now sits on the throne and calls us to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and imprisoned, to love those who are unloved.

Christ is the King. And he shall reign forever and ever.

Amen.