



All Hail, King Jesus

John 18:33-37

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November 21, 2021

It is the end of a year.

In the life of the church, this Sunday, on which we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, is the final Sunday of the ecclesial calendar. Next Sunday begins a new year as we move into the season of Advent.

Marking the comings and goings is an important part of our lives. Remembering the seasons helps us transition through the months and be prepared for what comes next in life.

I'm not sure about anyone else, but this year, at least, the end of the year, has snuck up pretty quick. Like, this Thursday is Thanksgiving. ... In our staff meeting last week, as we were planning for the Thanksgiving Food Baskets, there was a very pressing realization that the food baskets are happening *this week*. I mean, *today*. It has come up very quickly.

The change of calendar for the church invites us to look back in reflection, and to look forward in the anticipation of the season of Advent to come.

This change is marked by the celebration of Christ the King. But, in such a joyful day of transition, what are we celebrating? Are our hopes and dreams on this day, is our anticipation of Christ to come in Advent, are our expectations of Christ as King rightfully centered on the identity of Christ as defined in the scriptural texts? Are we faithfully reflecting on whom Christ is, or is our celebration tampered by our hopes for who Christ will be?

I did a little historical research on Christ the King Sunday, looking to determine what brought about this day's celebration. I was somewhat surprised to see that the feast of Christ the King is not even a century old. "The Feast of Christ the King arose in the aftermath of WWI, when the Roman Catholic church was losing its institutional importance and waking up to the reality of dictatorships and unchecked political power ... In this context, Pope Pius XI introduced the Feast of Christ the King in 1925, as an attempt to remind Christians across the Roman Catholic church of Christ's supreme, universal, and ultimate authority over earthly powers and rulers."ⁱ

First, let me briefly offer my skepticism.

The Church – capital C – the organizational and hierarchical church created the celebration of Christ the King Sunday as a way to try and hold on to its institutional power. The hope of this celebration, while pointing us at *Christ* the King, was used to try and maintain the power the church had held in

society, which, due to dictatorships and governmental rule, was waning. We tried to get people to acknowledge our power by telling them not to adhere to other powers.

Secondly, it's worth asking the question, how has the invitation of this feast held up?

If we set the skepticism aside and accept the purest of intentions, we can claim that the hope of this day was to help church members across the globe turn from the lust of the imperial power offered to them by governmental leaders and to center their hopes on a more Biblical vision of Christ as leader and provider. The desire of the Pope and the Catholic leadership was to get church members worldwide to refuse the invitation to offer blind support to leaders such as King George V of the United Kingdom, Chancellor and President Hans Luther of Germany, or President Calvin Coolidge here in the US.

The intent of the Feast of Christ the King was *not* that we might treat our world leaders as if they were the Christ. We are not invited to offer divine allegiance to presidents or dictators, but instead to pledge our allegiance to Christ above and over any nationalistic glory.

While I could accept this invitation, and could suggest that it is worthy to hail Christ as King while refusing to put such support and weight behind worldly leaders, as I read today's text, I'm not sure Christ would want us to call him king. As with much of Christ's ministry, this text stands as a rebuttal to the invitation of imperialistic titles and ideals.

Let's take a closer look.

This is a text often read on the Sunday before Easter, or on Good Friday as we recall the passion narrative in full. Christ has been charged by a group defined in John's gospel as "the Jews" as being a "malefactor." In this text, "the Jews" is not meant to encompass the full community of Israel, but is instead meant to suggest a specific enclave of Jewish leaders and followers who are convinced their power is at risk because of Jesus' presence.

Jesus is first taken before the Jewish elite, first Annas and then Caiaphas, who are both titled "high priests." Jesus is being taken up the chain of command as the crowd seeks the gravest of punishments. From Caiaphas' house, Jesus is taken to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate first speaks with "the Jews," who ascertain that Jesus is a criminal. It is named that they have brought Jesus to Pilate because they want him killed, and they, "the Jews," were not permitted to put him to death.

Having heard from the crowd, Pilate heads inside to interrogate Jesus.

Pilate is "an imperial functionary of the equestrian order who served as prefect of Judea."ⁱⁱ He is not a king; he is a pawn of the king, Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus, who ruled the Roman Empire at the time. As a prefect, Pilate is charged with keeping order in the region of Judea on behalf of Rome. Yet, for one who is responsible for keeping order, Pilate is known to elicit chaos. Historical records indicate that Pilate intentionally sparked confrontations with the people of Israel and Judea so that he would have reason to put them to death. Professor Richard Swanson states that Pilate's track record was so bad, he was eventually removed from office because of the confrontations he unnecessarily provoked.

Swanson adds, “[Pilate] liked killing Jews.”ⁱⁱⁱ ... How evil does a person have to be to be removed from office in the Roman Empire?

Anyway, Pilate goes in from speaking with the crowds and calls Jesus to be questioned. He asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Now, you can back up in John’s Gospel and find that being the “King of the Jews” was not an accusation that the Jews brought against Jesus. In their complaint before Pilate, they only accused Jesus of being a criminal, or a malefactor. But Pilate is a man of power, backed by the Roman Empire, and as such, he only has one concern – power that might be greater than his own. He doesn’t care about any of Jesus’ crimes, he only cares about Jesus’ status. He needs to know, is Jesus the “King of the Jews,” because if not, at least to Pilate, he’s nothing.

Jesus responds, “Are you asking me this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Jesus wants to know, from where is this accusation coming? Are you calling me a king, or are the Jews?

Pilate responds, “I am not a Jew, am I?” ... In other words, I can’t call you the King of the Jews, because I am not a Jew. I don’t know if you’re a king of these people, because I am not one of them. However, in the same breath, Pilate also says that the Jews have handed Jesus over to him. Is being a king that has run out of favor the only reason the Jews would have handed Jesus over to Pilate? Have they turned Jesus over simply because they know how harshly Pilate will deal with an official whose power threatens that of Rome?

Pilate asks Jesus a second question, “What have you done?”

Jesus’ response is the closest we get in the gospel of John to Jesus accepting the title of “king,” and it’s wishy-washy at best. In general, throughout the gospel text, Jesus rejects the title of king. For example, if we back up into John (chapter) 6, the text reads, “When Jesus realized that [the crowds] were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” He literally ran from the title “king.” Jesus has no interest in worldly titles or imperial power, both of which are associated with the title *king*.

Jesus responds to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. Were my kingdom of this world, my people would not have let me be turned over. No, my kingdom is not from here.”

Jesus is playing with a little bit of fire here, walking a very fine line that seems to offer a vague threat to Pilate. It seems Jesus is offering that were his kingdom of this world, Pilate would stand no chance at this capture and opportunity for imperial harm.

Finally, Pilate asks one last question, “So, you are a king?”

Pilate is thoroughly confused. First, Jesus seemed to reject the title, but then he admitted he has a kingdom. So, which is it? Are you a king, or are you not? Pilate needs to know, because, again, Pilate’s response to Jesus’ arrest will be determined by the level of threat Jesus presents to the empire. If Jesus has a dual identity, where his ulterior self is that of a king, he poses no real threat to Rome, and Pilate

may dismiss him all together. But if Jesus really is a king, if he hails from royal blood, if he carries the weight of the title, then Pilate will have no choice but to ensure his demise.

Jesus isn't interested in Pilate's games. So, instead of seeking a way out, or even answering the question out right, Jesus responds with a trap. Jesus says, "You say that "I am a king." It is for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who listens to the truth listens to my voice."

This response is a bit vague, and hard to fully grasp at first. Jesus could be saying one of two things. First, he could be saying, as it is most often interpreted, that Pilate thinks Jesus is a king – this is the accusation that Pilate believes is being brought upon Jesus, and so he accepts the possibility. In this first scenario, when Jesus says, "You say that I am a king," we could read it to mean Pilate is accusing Jesus of being a king. This would pose a threat to Caesar.

However, Jesus could be saying that Pilate believes that he, Pilate, is a king. That is, Pilate, in a way to prop himself up, in a way to give himself more courage, looks into the mirror each morning and says, "I (Pilate) am a king." In this second scenario, when Jesus says, "You say that "I am a king." Jesus is making the accusation that Pilate thinks himself a king. This is well within the realm of possibilities, because, as we have already noted, Pilate wanted more power than the role of prefect would normally offer. He's shown a desire and willingness to abuse his power, grasping at the power of king. This would pose a threat to Caesar.

Jesus follows up this accusation with a promise that he, Jesus, knows the truth because he is the truth. How does Jesus know that Pilate calls himself a king? Because Jesus knows the truth. How does Jesus know that Pilate has kingly ambition? Because Jesus knows the truth.

In the Roman empire, the quickest way to get into trouble is to be a threat to the Emperor – to pose a threat to the order of power. It is well known that in the Roman Empire, power often passed on to the those who were ambitious enough to kill the king. "Et tu Brute?"

If Pilate thinks that Jesus knows of his private ambitions to be the king, if Pilate is worried that Jesus might testify in the public of his hope and desire to move up the rankings, then Pilate cannot let Jesus be free on the streets. Pilate cannot have the truth incarnate be free. Our scripture reading ends here in this text, but if we keep reading a few more verses, Pilate first asks a reactionary question, "What is truth?," seemingly to dismiss Jesus' accusation. But then immediately following, Pilate returns to the crowds and offers to dismiss a known seditious in replacement of Jesus, such that he might sentence Jesus to die. That's how much he is threatened by Jesus, not because he is a king, but because he knows truth.

The Feast of Christ the King has taken on a misplaced invitation in a world that is clearly hungry for power to be held and maintained in the hands of a select few. Judge and jury alike, in the halls of (in)justice and politics, it is clear that the power-ambition of imperial leadership is still a lust call to those who believe themselves to be more worthy of God's love and God's preference. The result of the creation of this day of celebration in 1925 has not been as Pope Pius intended. Instead of disassociating ourselves with the dictatorships and presidential aspirations of corrupt and immoral

leaders, sadly too many in the church have used this day to claim their place in an “army of the Lord,” who seeks to crown a physical being as their representative of God, even if that being is not an actual person, but a mental representation of themselves.

When we look to the scriptural text to identify how Jesus might be hailed as king, what we find is that Jesus will claim no such title. For Jesus, the title of king is as corrupt as Pilate himself. Jesus refuses the title, and instead defines himself as *truth*. Jesus says people will follow me not because of my imperialistic ambitions or the power I wield as Caesar, but because my kingdom, my way of living, my identity itself is cemented in the *truth*. People will follow me because they listen to the *truth*. I came into this world to testify to the *truth*.

In our world today, there is some misunderstanding about how *truth* works. We have seen this deteriorate over recent years, but in the truth of which Jesus speaks, there is no “fake news,” there is no underlying deception, there is no denying the reality of what is, there is no personal preference nor individual freedom, and there is no subjective opinion. The truth is. That’s the post ... that’s the tweet: “The truth *is*.”

And look, we can run from the truth. We can try to deny the truth. Pilate did – he had Jesus sentenced to death to avoid the truth being known. We can cover it up, shred it, burn it, delete it, and swallow it deep into the depths of our soul. But the truth is the truth. No political theatre can change the truth. No biased judge can alter the truth. No gerrymandering can hide the truth. No talked heads can explain away the truth.

We live in a world where people try to control the truth because, deep down, they want to be the king. And like Pilate, people will go to whatever length and put in whatever effort and money necessary to silence any truth that would cut at, chip away, or minimize their ability to be king – even the king of their own realm.

But in Christ, if we truly give ourselves to the one who is called Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Savior, then there is but one king we can proclaim and hail – and he chooses not the title of “king,” but instead, goes by the name of “Truth.” “I am,” Jesus says, “the way, the truth, and the life.”

So in this feast of a day, in which the church is invited to proclaim Christ as King, it is worth us asking, what do we hail as righteous? Where do we put our weight? Are we looking to uphold the institutions and structures that continue to marginalize, preferentialize, and minimize so that a determined body may have power? Or are we lifting up the declaration of Christ, that God’s love shall reign, and that justice, peace, and truth shall prevail? Where do you put your weight? Today is not a day to align Christ with imperial control, but to stand in opposition to earthly powers that Christ may be hailed as the truth he declares in himself. May it be so.

ⁱ Anderson Jeremiah and Rebecca Aechthner. *Christ, the (Subversive) King*. <http://politicaltheology.com>. Retrieved November 16, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Gerard Sloyan. *John: Interpretation: A commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2010.