

John 18:33-37

**33** So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" **34** Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" **35** Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" **36** Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." **37** Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "you say that I am a king. For this purpose, I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Today is a special Sunday in the liturgical year. It is the Reign of Christ or sometimes called Christ the King Sunday. Today marks the last Sunday in the Christian year. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of advent and thus the beginning of the Christian new year. It is fitting that the end of the Christian liturgical year would be looking forward to the reign of Christ, as all of human history, the story of creation and scripture, all looks forward to the reign of Christ.

For many churches, though, this is just another Sunday. Ask many non-denominational pastors about liturgical colors and you'll receive a blank stare. I grew up in a church that paid little if any attention to the liturgical year. Sure, we had a Christmas Eve service, but I didn't even know what advent was until I was an adult, let alone the less well-known liturgical holidays, such as Reign of Christ, or Epiphany Sunday.

Now, I have come to deeply love the liturgical calendar. It marks the rhythms of the church and of our lives, and invites us to experience our faith fellowship with one another but also with all the saints that have gone before us. When we celebrate advent, we join in a small way with all of our faith ancestors who waited, hoping, expecting the Messiah. In the season of Lent, we join with our faith ancestors who desperately awaited a final sacrifice, we join the women at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, and we wait with them outside the tomb on Holy Saturday. We join in their joy on Easter Sunday. On Pentecost we join our faith ancestors in gratitude and amazement as we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit. And today, we look forward to the reign of Christ as all our faith ancestors have throughout all of human history. We look back at our journey so far, and look forward to the reign of Christ, remembering always that Christ is and was and always will be King through it all.

Though Jesus must not have looked like much of a king before Pilate, and Pilate knew something about kings. Pilate was the Roman official in charge of the entire province containing Jerusalem under the authority of the emperor. He had a reasonably sized army at his disposal, he appointed the high priests and held their vestments under his control, only releasing them for certain festivals. Judgements of the Sanhedrin were subject to his ratification and could be overruled. Pilate was deeply hated by the Jews. Jews detested their Roman occupation but Pilate had a way of

exasperating the situation. Breaking with the better judgement of his predecessors, Pilate hung idol-like images of the Roman emperor Tiberius in Jerusalem, only to have them taken down after only six days when the Jews protested vigorously, apparently unafraid to lose their lives over the matter. Pilate also took temple funds and built an aqueduct, sparking a large protest which was swiftly and fiercely dealt with, and the ensuing massacre may be the story recounted in part of the Gospel of Luke. He was disliked by nearly everyone of the time, it seems, and his deeds are well documented by early church historians and fathers. He is portrayed as a harsh and unjust man at worst, and a weak coward at best, but Pilate knew about power, how to maintain power and how to use power, and Pilate knew about kings, what they looked like, how they acted, and how they welded power.

Pilate served under Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius was deeply suspicious of the Roman senate and even of the leaders he himself appointed. If one found himself on the wrong side of Tiberius' suspicions, punishment was swift and merciless. I imagine this was heavy on Pilate's mind when the Jews, attempting to provoke Pilate to action, taunt him saying he is not a friend of Caesar. Such a suggestion could've meant death.

Yet before Pilate stood a Jewish man of unremarkable status. Pilate's hate and disdain for the Jews is obvious in his sarcastic questions. The idea of there being a king of the Jews must have seemed as logical as a round square to him, for a people occupied and easily crushed who held no real power, what would kingship even mean for them?

But Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. If Jesus kingdom were of this world, then Pilate would've seen power in a familiar way, in servants fighting that Jesus not be handed over, in mighty armies. But Jesus kingdom is not of this world. It is not power as Pilate knew it, or as even our modern leaders would recognize it.

Jesus had never been what the people expected him to be. The Jews expected a king in the style of David, robes and crowns and power and concubines. They did not expect a poor craftsman, from the side of town no one wanted to admit they were from, whose birth was mostly only lauded only by the very least among the Jewish people, the poor shepherds and the foreign wisemen.

And yet Jesus comes and declares himself to be a king. No army. No palace. No servants. No real power, at least so it seemed to Pilate and others. This king would be beaten, tortured, and willingly led to a cross. That was no king in Pilate's book. And yet, this king holds power over all of creation, over life and death itself, and promises to reign forever in glory and power far greater than Pilate or Tiberius could have imagined. Christ reigns in power for us.

From a worldly perspective, however, we in the modern world can struggle with that concept. Pilate looked at Jesus and saw a man totally at his mercy, not a king. For if Jesus was a king, he would surely not have been beaten and bloody before Pilate, or so Pilate reasoned.

Yet Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world. If Jesus were an earthly king, like Tiberius, he would have raised up an army and punished all those that sought his life. And despite having the ability to free himself, to act as any human king might've done, Jesus chooses to willingly lay down his life for us. Ultimate power yielded to ultimate love because, thankfully, God's ways are not our ways.

We see this still today when we wonder why God allows injustice, pain and suffering to continue. When things seem to go so very awry in our lives and communities, we too can look upon Jesus and wonder why our King does not act in the way we expect. If Jesus is reigning in power, why does he not act, change things, right the many wrongs we see in our society? Some even expect Jesus to act as the Roman emperor would have, coming with power and might to squash those other sinners that certain Christians find so appalling.

But God sees the whole story of creation, whereas we limited humans have trouble seeing beyond the trenches we find ourselves in. Christ willingly laid down his life because it accomplished the ultimate goal of salvation and reconciliation. It seemed absolutely nonsensical to those around him during his earthly ministry that he claimed to be God and king and yet allowed himself to be murdered. But God saw the whole story and was accomplishing something incredible, God was accomplishing something with eternal ramifications though working in a way that didn't mesh with human understandings of power.

Today when we see so much that is not as it ought to be, when we are reminded that sin stalks like a lion, that our world is beautiful but broken, and when death steals the ones we love, it might not feel like Christ is reigning in power for us. Certainly, Christ doesn't reign like any earthly king we could name. But God's kingdom is not of this world. The one thing we can know for certain is that no matter what happens in our world, God is still seated on God's throne. We here in the trenches may feel like our circumstances are insurmountable, that God is losing ground when we see our churches declining or our communities divided, but God sees the whole story of creation and is constantly weaving all things together for God's glory and our good. Not one thing that happens is a surprise to God, and not one thing is out of God's control and power.

As we look back over the past liturgical year, from the start of Advent 2020 to now, there have been many highs and many lows both in our personal lives and our lives together. But today we remember that Christ is, and was, and will be king through it all. Through every struggle of the past year, from covid to division, Christ was king, working all things to God's glory and for our good, though sometimes it was hard to see God's rule, because God's kingdom is not of this world and God isn't like a human king. Today, as we stand ready to face a new year, with all the uncertainty it brings, Christ is king, working all things to God's glory and for our good. Tomorrow, and all the days to come, Christ will be King, working all things for God's glory and for our good, though sometimes it will be hard to see it, because Christ's kingdom is not of this world, and

Christ is not like a human king. And we join with all of our brothers and sisters, all of our faith ancestors, in looking toward the day that Christ's reign will be realized in a new way on Earth, when there will no more distinction between this world and God's kingdom.

Two thousand years ago the King of all creation stood before Pontius Pilate, but Pilate did not recognize the king before him. Bruised, beaten, oppressed, hated by his own people, seemingly powerless, Jesus was like no king that Pilate had ever seen and thus Pilate concluded that this man was not a king at all. But today we join together in acknowledging the Kingship and reign of Jesus, remembering that Jesus kingdom is not of this world, and it doesn't always look like what we might expect, but nevertheless Jesus is and was and always will be King. May God grant us the discern that Pilate lacked, to see what ultimate power and ultimate love look like, and to recognize the King whose kingdom is not of this world.

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