

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/22/2009, Christ the King Sunday
John 18:33-37
True Kingship

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³³Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Pontius Pilate was a long way from home, with a tough call. Some traditions say that he came from Scotland¹, though there is no way to say for sure. Perhaps he had been a soldier at one time. Now he is a politician assigned to a difficult post. The Middle East was volatile back then, as it is now. In our day and age, the world wants oil from the Middle East; in Pilate’s day and age, Rome wanted corn from Egypt², lest there be hunger in Rome and rioting in the streets. Rome did not want civil disturbances in the Middle East. Pilate’s job was to keep the peace.

Pilate was not a Jew, and he seems to have been impatient with the customs and sensitivities of the Jews. The refusal of the chief priests to enter his judgment hall, for example, probably put him in a bad mood:

²⁸ Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover. (John 18:28, KJV)

Why would it have “defiled” them to enter a hall of judgment? The administration of justice can be a godly thing. Anyway, it was not Pilate but the chief priests who were bent on death and slaughter. They do not honor his office as judge with the presentation of evidence against Jesus. Rather, *they* have already judged Jesus and leave to Pilate only the punishment they deem fit for their judgment.

Since they will not go into his judgment hall, Pilate must go out to them, playing a kind of tag, back and forth between Jesus and his

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pages 109-110

² Ibid.

accusers. Early in the morning, he had found Jesus thrust into his judgment hall. Jesus had been interrogated through the night, first by the priest Annas, who was father-in-law to Caiaphas, the high priest, and then by Caiaphas himself. Now, early in the day, the priests bring Jesus to Pilate, plunging him into the judgment hall, but refusing to enter themselves.

So Pilate goes out to them and demands to know the charge brought against Jesus. The priests refuse to answer, as if it is none of Pilate's business:

²⁹ Pilate then went out unto them, and said, What accusation bring ye against this man? ³⁰ They answered and said unto him, If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee. (John 18:29-30, KJV)

So, Pilate goes back to his judgment hall and questions Jesus. He had received no satisfaction from the priests. Maybe he will do better with Jesus:

³³Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Now things become interesting. Pilate does not understand it, and on the face of it, it *is* an implausible thing, but this poor man standing before Pilate is really King of the Universe. Furthermore, Jesus conducts himself in a kingly way. First off, Jesus reminds Pilate of his duty as a governor. Jesus raises the question of evidence:

³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

That is, "Pilate, are you exercising Roman justice, with your own investigation and testimonies, or are you simply responding to hearsay?"

Pilate refuses to answer Jesus on this. Instead he evades the question of justice by claiming that he is not a Jew and simply demanding of Jesus what he had done.

Then Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter. He uses the word that strikes fear in the political heart of Pilate: Jesus speaks of his "kingship":

³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.” (John 18:36, RSV)

Notice that Jesus is not denying that he is a king. Nor is he somehow spiritualizing his kingship, as if to say, “Pilate, you need not worry about me. I am a king in heaven, but not here on earth.” Just the reverse: Jesus is claiming kingship on earth, and kingship of a higher authority that any Pilate knows. Jesus does not say, “My kingship is not *in* this world,” but rather “My kingship is not *of* this world.” He goes on to say that his “kingship is not *from* the world.” In fact, one way to interpret the saying of Jesus about his servants “fighting for him that he not be taken” is that Jesus is here pinning down the superiority of his kingship over that of the Roman emperors. Their rule is defended by their servants, by their armies. Such servants are capable of being defeated, and sometimes the generals of armies end up overthrowing the regime. But the kingship of Jesus does not depend on his servants. His kingship is of stronger stuff than that. His kingship comes from heaven, from angels, legions of angels, indeed from his heavenly Father, Maker of heaven and earth. No one is going to be able to overthrow the kingship of Jesus, for no one is going to be able to overthrow the *Source* of his kingship.

At this point, it is as if Jesus rescues Pilate from bewilderment and answers the question Pilate was probably trying to frame for himself: If you are a king – indeed, an unconquerable king – then what *kind* of a king are you? Are you going to create havoc in the Middle East? Are you going to get me in trouble with my masters back in Rome.

And to such questions, this King speaks of “truth”:

³⁷Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the *truth*. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”

At this declaration concerning truth, Pilate seems to have breathed a sigh of relief, and in the long run, he goes ahead and condemns Jesus to death. It is not that Pilate denies that Jesus is a king. In fact, he orders that a sign

should be placed on the bloody cross affirming that Jesus is “king of the Jews.” So, it is not that Pilate doubts that Jesus is a king. It is simply that he does not fear a king whose concern is “truth.” And in that, Pilate is wrong. He is very wrong.

Jesus is indeed a king, but a different kind of king than the ordinary king on earth.

This past summer Carol and I became hooked on a British TV series called “The Tudors.”³ It’s about the reign of King Henry the Eighth in England which was, if you remember, around the same time as the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. Henry the Eighth is known for many things, including the beginning of the Anglican Church, but perhaps especially for having had a series of six wives, two of whom were beheaded for treason. The series portrays King Henry as self-absorbed, terribly manipulative, and too much preoccupied with sex. He is greedy and insecure. He moves people around as if they are chess pieces on a chessboard. Everybody around him lives in fear of falling out of favor and either being banished from court or executed. King Henry claims for himself absolute power in all things, including over the church, which gets him into big trouble with the Pope. You know the saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely – well it seems to be true in the case of Henry.

All in all, the reign of King Henry the Eighth is about as different from the reign of Jesus as you can get. He shows no concern for the poor; no compassion for common folks, peasants and farmers and the like. He is terrible to women, especially his wives. To live in the kingdom of Henry the Eighth is to live in fear and uncertainty; to be entirely at the mercy of the whims of an evil monarch.

To live under Christ’s reign, however, is to live in a kingdom where love and justice prevail and where mercy and compassion flow with abundance. Jesus’s subjects do not live in fear for there is nothing that can ultimately harm them since all of their enemies have been defeated once and for all by their own King’s death and resurrection. This King does not abuse or manipulate people, but loves them so much that he was willing to die for them. He only desires their love and devotion and faithfulness in return. No, the Kingdom of God is not like any other

³ This section, about the Tudors, mostly comes from the sermon of my wife, Carol, for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2009.

kingdom, for our Lord Jesus is not like any other king or ruler who has ever walked this earth.

The problem of Pilate, Henry the Eighth, and many a king is that they underestimate the power of truth. Pilate imagines that if all Jesus rules is those who yearn for the truth, then he has little to fear from Jesus and from his followers. But Pilate is wrong in this matter. King Henry VIII might rule through power, intimidation, and manipulation, but Jesus rules the heart, and that makes him much more powerful in the end. Indeed, Pilate's Roman Empire is long since gone, but the kingdom of this Man he condemned remains and will remain for ever.

Jesus teaches and illustrates what it means to live a full human life. Walking with him means that you will not have lived in vain, I will not have lived in vain. Walking with Jesus leads us into the fullness of what is good and true and lovely in a human life. Many people have found it to be so, and in the process they have transformed the world. They took Rome's miserable empire, with its indifference to the poor and to the weak, with its living by the sword and the shedding of blood, and overcame that empire. The reign of Christ the King is most powerful because Jesus has the ability to conquer the heart. Jesus can rule your soul if you will let him.

My great teacher Robert Jenson once referred to a cynical saying of Hitler about the armies of Christ. Hitler is said to have mocked the Catholic Church's opposition to Nazism by quipping, "And how many legions does the Pope have?" Well, Jenson said that there is an important answer to Hitler's question. It goes like this: the Church has legions upon legions, soldiers upon soldiers, "and every one of them bulletproof."

My way of putting it is this: Yesterday, when I brought the Blessed Sacrament to our member Crystal Ramdeen over in Lenox Hill Hospital, there was no weapon in Pontius Pilate's arsenal, nor in all of Hitler's armies, equal to the power of the *truth* I spoke to her in the name of Jesus Christ, the King of truth. For I spoke words that shall overcome enemies that this world's kings can never touch: even sin, death, and the devil. With the simple, ancient words of Christ the King, "Crystal, this is my body, this is my blood, given for you for the forgiveness of sins," I thereby conquered worlds of evil and granted hope that no other king can even dream of.

We serve a King with power over life and death. There *should be no stopping us!* There should be no way to suppress Christ's message of love,

no way to scare believers away from it, no way to hinder new people from casting in their lot with Jesus Christ, our beautiful Savior, King of kings, and Lord of lords, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.