

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/25/2012, Christ the King Sunday
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Revelation 1:4-8, John 18:33-37

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

In his interrogation of Jesus, Pilate is rather stubborn about a certain point. He wants to know whether Jesus is a king.

Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou *a king* then? (John 18:37, KJV)

It's a matter of professional responsibility for Pilate. Does Jesus represent a threat against the Empire? If he does pose such a threat, Pilate knows very well how to handle him. He has the power of Roman soldiers and Roman crucifixion at his command. The uncertainty of Pilate's situation is that he cannot quite sort out whether Jesus is a king or not.

The answer of Jesus seems not to be a fatal one in the eyes of Pilate. Jesus says that his kingship is "not of this world," and that he comes into the world "to bear witness to the truth." This does not seem to trouble Pilate overmuch. Pilate murmurs his pensive question about truth, as if lost in thought, and then declares Jesus innocent:

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all. (John 18:38, KJV)

The outcry against this is so great that Pilate eventually capitulates and orders the execution of Jesus. Perhaps he concluded that whether or not Jesus claimed to be a king, his mere existence represented a political threat, and so Pilate did away with him.

Still, there is ambiguity in Pilate about the kingship of Jesus. He declares that he finds "no fault at all" in Jesus, suggesting that Pilate does not find Jesus to be a king or a political threat. And yet, Pilate orders that the sign above the head of the crucified Jesus should declare him to be a king after all:

¹⁹And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. ²¹Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate,

Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews. ²²Pilate answered, What I have written I have written. (John 19:19-22, KJV)

Thus, Pilate declares Jesus to be a king, but he is anxious and uncertain whether the kingship of Jesus is the sort that represents a threat against the Empire.

PILATE'S QUESTION FOR OURSELVES

Each of us could well take Pilate's question to Jesus, "Art thou a king?," rephrase it, and aim it at ourselves:

Is Jesus *my* king?

My goal in this sermon is that we will nod our heads yes to this question and with newfound resolve will say, "Aye, Jesus is *my* king. And I mean for this world to be better off because of it." For I believe that loyalty to Christ the King means loyalty to our neighbors too. And having Jesus as our King means good things for our earth.

U.S.A.F.A.

I think I have mentioned before that when I was a young man, I had a brief military career. Two years. I served as a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs for two years before resigning. I did not resign in opposition to the military. Indeed, I loved the military and I was a good cadet. Looking back on it, I think my resignation amounted to a painful searching for God's plan for my life—a plan that never felt true until that good day when I headed off to theological seminary to begin my training for the holy ministry.

So, I think I told you before that I served at the Air Force Academy. What I think I have not yet mentioned is that my career at the Academy was almost cut short my very first day there. We received our fatigues and combat boots, our hair was shaved off, and we were taken into a room for what is called the "military oath of allegiance."

An officer read the oath aloud for us, to preview it for us. Then we were asked to repeat the oath after the officer, phrase by phrase. But I did not repeat the oath. I was not a rebellious kid. Far from it. I loved our land and was ready to serve and die for my country. But I felt I could not take that oath!

Alas, another officer looking on noted this and summoned me out of the room. I was caught. In private he asked me why I did not take the oath. I answered this way: I said that I had listened to the oath and I had observed that the oath asked for a kind of loyalty from me that I felt I could only give to

Jesus. Guess what the officer answered. He simply said, “Therefore, *you* are the one we want to take the oath. We need you to be an officer in the military.” So, he sent me back into the room, I took the oath, and thus commenced my military training.

Notice the ambiguity in the officer’s counsel. It was akin to Pilate’s question to Jesus, “Art thou a king?” Well, yes and no. Jesus is indeed a king, but not the kind of king who hurts this world. Likewise, the officer seemed to believe that the best way for me to serve my country was for me to indeed acknowledge Jesus as my king. Let Jesus be my sovereign. Then all else is fine. This officer at least was willing to accept that.

Again, my theme in this sermon is that having Jesus Christ as our king should make our world a better place. And our world needs that. It needs to be a better place.

GRAND CANYON 1991

In the 1991 film *Grand Canyon*, there is a beautiful scene of longing for a better world. A well-to-do lawyer, Mac, played by Kevin Kline, has left the Lakers game, made a wrong turn, and wandered into a rough neighborhood. His car breaks down. He calls for a tow truck, but before it arrives, he and his Lexus catch the attention of a gang. They gather around him. The gang leader has a gun. Things look bad.

Then the tow truck pulls up, and, to the astonishment of the gang, the driver simply begins to attach the car to his truck. The driver is named Simon, played by Danny Glover. The gang views this tow truck driver as interfering with their business. It is outrageous in their eyes. Insane. And they complain about it. Again, things look bad.

Simon then takes the leader of the gang aside and talks with him. I have jotted down the dialogue—it seems so perfect to me. Simon, the tow truck driver, begins the dialogue, speaking to the head of the gang:

Simon Look, I gotta ask you a favor... [Simon explains that his tow truck and now the car attached to it are his responsibility]

Head of the gang: Do you think I’m stupid.

Simon Look, I don’t know nothing about you and you don’t know nothing about me. But I do know this: I gotta get out of here, and you got the gun. So I’m ask you a favor for a second time. Let me go my way here.

Gang leader I'm gonna grant you that favor. And I expect you to remember this if we ever meet again. But first you have to answer one more thing for me. And you gotta tell me the truth. Are you asking me a favor as a sign of respect, or are you asking me a favor because I got the gun?

And then Simon gives his great answer:

Simon Man, the world isn't supposed to work like this. I mean, maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you whether I can. That dude is supposed to be able to wait for his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different from what it is.

Gang leader So, what's your answer?

Simon You ain't have the gun, we ain't having this conversation.

[He laughs] That's what I thought. No gun. No respect. That's why I always got the gun.

And that's the end of the scene. The leader of the gang signals that they are done and the gang drives away.

...THIS AIN'T THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE

Consider Simon's line: "... this ain't the way it's supposed to be." That line can be transported from place to place in this world—to the huts of poor people and to the mansions of the Hamptons, it is too often the same: things are not yet right. On the streets and on the sidewalks and on the playgrounds of our schools; in the laying off of faithful workers and in the unemployment lines that grind people down; in the broken homes and broken romances and the broken hearts; in the Nazi literature and the terrorist cells; in the red-light districts and in racial conflicts; in betrayals of friendships, in crime, in manipulations and frauds, and in ten thousand scenes in our sad human story things "just ain't supposed to be this way." Things should be better. And they will be to the degree that you and I can help by being true to Christ the King.

So Simon does a Christ-like thing in the movie: He interposes his life between a stranger and a gun. And the gang leader too feels that this world just is not right. "That's what I thought. No gun. No respect." Yet he feels, doesn't he, that he should have respect, even apart from the gun. Christians are the ones

who should be doing these Christ-like things. We are the ones who should be interposing our lives between others and the dangers and difficulties of life. We are the ones who should be giving respect to others, without regard to race or age or language or prosperity.

THE CATECHISM

In Luther's *Small Catechism*, he turns around the calm petition, "Thy kingdom come," and aims it right at ourselves:

May your kingdom come.

What is this? Answer:

In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come *to us*.

How does this come about? Answer:

Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his Holy Word and *live godly lives here in time* and hereafter in eternity.

It is a lovely thing to pray for the coming of God's kingdom, when our Lord Jesus will return with beauty and power and set things straight. But it is also needful that we "live godly lives here in time," thereby acknowledging Jesus as our king here and now.

ST. JOHN

I close with this note about today's reading from Revelation Chapter 1. St. John does not get very far in his letter before he can hardly contain himself and he bursts forth in a doxology. He is speaking of Jesus, whom he calls "the first-born of the dead, and the *ruler of kings* on earth." St. John sings a song of praise of Jesus with these words:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and *made us a kingdom*, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.
Amen. (Rev. 1:5-6, RSV)

That's what we are: a kingdom. Baptism has constituted us so. We are to be the true and loyal subjects of Christ the King, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.