

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Christ the King • November 25, 2018

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 • Psalm 93 • Revelation 1:4b-8 • John 18:33-37

In some churches, today is celebrated not as “Christ the King Sunday,” but as “Reign of Christ Sunday.” “Christ the King,” the thinking goes, is too feudal, too archaic, too old fashioned. Christ the King is a medieval festival that needs to be brought up to speed, brought out of the dark ages and into the light of modernity.

Christ the King might be an ancient title. But Christ the King Sunday is a relatively modern invention. It was established as a feast day by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Which means that Christ the King Sunday did not emerge when devotion to kings was at its height but in the wake of World War I, when monarchies around the world were being toppled. Pius was doubling down on the kingship of Christ at a time when kingship itself seemed to be fading away.

And in his encyclical instituting the feast day, which I read so you don't have to, Pius sounds relatively upbeat about the prospects for Christ's kingdom being realized on earth. He writes that “once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King, society will at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony.”¹ The kingdom of God seemed within reach. And Pius wasn't the only one so optimistic about the prospects of peace, as monuments to the soldiers who died in “the war to all end wars” remind us.

It is easy to scoff at Pius for being naively optimistic about human progress. But we are just as susceptible to that same irrational exuberance. Back in the 1990s, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair promised a Third Way of politics that could take the best ideas from both political parties and save us from the worst excesses of partisanship. It didn't work out. In the 2000s, some economists thought that we had depression-proofed the economy and that recessions were a thing of the past.² It didn't work out. Only a few years ago, Mark Zuckerberg told us that social media would create a global community that helps people understand one another and let people engage differing points of view in a respectful manner. It hasn't worked out.

It's easy to imagine a perfect world like Pope Pius did. It's easy to imagine a world without war that leaves scores dead. Without depressions that drive people into poverty. Without negative partisanship that drives mistrust. But the process of getting there is more complicated than we think it is. The problem isn't that we don't have good intentions. Or that we've become morally ignorant. It's that we fail to reckon with the way power affects us. We fight the war to end all wars. We have the recession to end all recessions. We have the argument to end all arguments. And yet it never is.

Because even our best efforts to pursue the common good are morally constrained. Earthly power, power that we seek, the power that we exchange with one another, has a way of corroding our moral vision. We compromise values where we have to. We cut corners. We play dirty and tell ourselves that the end justifies the means. We tell ourselves that we'll be benevolent with power once we get it. That we will focus on other people and seek the common good instead of our own benefit. It doesn't work out.

Earlier this month, I gave the invocation at one of our town council meetings. Normally the way this works is it's just me and one or two other people. At 8:00 someone leads the pledge of allegiance and then you get up and say a very generic prayer into a microphone that isn't even turned on. Then the council takes a picture with the Cub Scouts who are there, take comments from

¹ “Quas Primas (December 11, 1925) | PIUS XI,” accessed November 19, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html.

² Paul R. Krugman and University Paul Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 9.

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members of the public at the meeting (of which there are none), and go into private session. Which means you're home by 8:04.

But this was the night before the election. So there are a lot of people there. And when they get to the public comment portion of the meeting, things get nasty pretty quick. Now, if things got heated over a resolution, if people were debating the merits of some policy proposal, you wouldn't think anything of it. But about two minutes in, it becomes clear that what people are mad about isn't a policy. They're mad about something else: a lack of civility. And so they start pointing out other people's incivility in the most uncivil of ways. Finger pointing. Snide comments. Bad faith arguments. Patronizing remarks. And so after about half an hour, everyone is mad at everybody else. Nothing of substance has been discussed. And nothing has been accomplished. Even worse. They have tried to create a civil community by being uncivil to one another, even if just for a moment. It didn't work out.

We like to think that the ends justify the means. But once your means compromise your values, even temporarily, the end is never quite the same. And that's the problem with worldly power. You get worldly power by compromising your values. And you keep it by violence and coercion.

Think about Pilate for a second. Pilate is someone who has climbed the ladder of the Roman Empire. In that system, you get power by supporting other people. By acting like you want the same things they do, by deferring to their judgement. And you keep power maintaining order. Remember, Pilate's goal in the story isn't to kill Jesus. Pilate's goal is to maintain the status quo. Pilate doesn't wake up and think, "I want to kill Jesus today." Pilate wakes up and thinks, "What do I have to do to make it to the end of the day?" To borrow a modern phrase, Pilate is not playing three-dimensional chess. Pilate is playing zero-dimensional chess. Pilate's primary goal is law and order. And you can have all the law and order you want, but only if you don't care about justice.

So when Pilate asks if Jesus is a king, what he's trying to get at is whether Jesus is a threat. And yet Jesus doesn't quite answer his question. Jesus says that his kingdom is not from this world. So what does Jesus mean when he says that? It could mean that Jesus is unconcerned with what happens in the world. But that doesn't make a lot of sense. Jesus is clearly very interested in our relationships and our economies and our social norms and how they distribute power. Or it could mean that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with the kingdom of Rome. But that doesn't make a lot of sense either. Because Jesus's life and ministry are spent among the people who have been made expendable by that empire.

What Jesus means by "my kingdom is not of this world" is that his kingdom, his power, isn't given to him by other people, and it can't be taken away by other people. It can't be given to him means that Jesus never has to change his mission and purpose in life to gain power. He never compromises his values. You notice in the gospels that Jesus never asks for feedback about how his teachings are being received. Jesus never says that maybe "Blessed are the poor" is too narrow and that maybe "Blessed are all" might play better. Jesus's power doesn't come from anyone else.

And it can't be taken from him means that Jesus never has to fear people like Pilate who threaten to take his power away. That when Jesus comes close to the people who oppose him, he never tones down his action. How does Jesus put it? If my power was "from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." And yet they don't. Because there's no way it can be taken from him.

There is no shortage of Christians who mistake Jesus's power for Pilate's power. Who cozy up to strongmen who promise to pursue their agenda in exchange for their blessing. And it feels good at first to be taken seriously, but it never ends well. Because once you say Yes to earthly power,

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it becomes almost impossible to say No. And instead of preaching the gospel you become a court preacher. The preachers brought in to flatter people like Pilate. Someone who will search for a loophole to justify the evils they commit. Someone who will always find an excuse for their misbehavior. Someone who will always find a rationalization for their maleficence. It doesn't work out.

Pope Pius learned that the hard way. Because the war to end all wars did not end all wars. When Hitler's brand of fascism first emerged in Germany, Pius was an outspoken critic. But when the National Socialists took over the German government, he caved. In 1933, his secretary of state negotiated an agreement with the Nazi government.³ Hitler promised to make the Catholic Church the cornerstone of German nationalism. All the Church had to do was lift its ban on Catholics joining the Nazi party, not comment on any political happenings in the country, and make its bishops swear an oath of allegiance to the Nazi government. Signing the deal would give Hitler legitimacy on the international stage. It would limit the ability of bishops to speak out against injustice. But it would also give the church a seat close to power. So Pius signed the deal. For over ten million people, it didn't work out.

In Jesus, we have been given a different kind of power. The power of forgiveness. The power of justice. The power of mercy. No one can give it to us and no one can take it away from us. It's a gift of God. Which means that we're free to live without caving to injustice or hedging our bets or giving up our convictions. Because Christ is King. And he has given us his power.

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³ "The Vatican Concordat With Hitler's Reich: The Concordat of 1933 Was Ambiguous in Its Day and Remains So," America Magazine, September 1, 2003, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2003/09/01/vatican-concordat-hitlers-reich-concordat-1933-was-ambiguous-its-day-and-remains>.