

CHRIST THE KING | NOVEMBER 21, 2021

DANIEL 7:9-10, 13-14 | PSALM 93 | REVELATION 1:4B-8 | JOHN
18:33-37

Christ the King Sunday is a public relations nightmare. After all, when we say that someone is acting like a king, we rarely mean it as a compliment. We mean that they're uncaring, unaccountable, and unqualified. So why would we use the title "king" to talk about Jesus?

Some churches have sought a way out this dilemma by changing the name from Christ the King Sunday to Reign of Christ Sunday. Others have sought to make everyone equally unhappy by celebrating Christ the King and/or Reign of Christ Sunday. One liturgical theologian suggested we drop the issue entirely and just call it, "The Last Sunday of the Year."¹ One imagines the color of the day would be beige.

It's wrong to call Jesus a king. Jesus isn't uncaring or unaccountable or unqualified. And we don't have to pretend it's the Middle Ages. But you lose something when you drop that title entirely. Because it's wrong, but it's wrong in an illuminating way.

Today's gospel reading helps us understand why. In this famous scene in John's gospel, Jesus has just finished talking with Caiaphas, the high priest, and is brought to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate begins with a simple question. Are you the king of the Jews? Essentially, *What's going on with you all having this trial?* Jesus responds by reframing the question. *My kingdom is not from here.*

On the surface, the meaning is obvious. His kingdom is not Pilate's kingdom. But it's deeper, too. His kingdom is not simply from the next protectorate or the next colony over. My kingdom, Jesus says, is not of this *kosmos*. It isn't of the world's ways of ordering power. It doesn't derive authority from its lineage or power from the threat of violence. It is categorically different. After all, Jesus says, if my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be here to fight and prevent me from being handed over. But they're not. Because Jesus's kingdom can't be fought for.

It's important to parse out the meaning of this very carefully. Jesus doesn't simply say that the disciples could come on the scene fight for him, but it probably wouldn't be a very good idea. Or that they could start killing his enemies, but it would be sort of hypocritical. No. He says that they can't. It is impossible. Because as soon as you draw the sword, as soon as you throw a punch, as soon as you start thinking of Jesus in the terms that Pilate thinks of himself, you're no longer defending Jesus and his kingdom, only your own interests. As soon as you try to fight for Jesus with violence or coercion or intimidation, you're no longer fighting for Jesus.

¹ "King or No King?," *ELCA Worship* (blog), November 16, 2017, <https://blogs.elca.org/worship/873/>.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

That's not to say we haven't tried. In the Middle Ages—back when “king” was a compliment—Christians marauded their way through the Holy Land, leaving a path of destruction in their wake. We've rightly lamented the crusades as wasteful and violent. But back in the 1980s, the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck took it a step further and claimed that they actually made Christian truths false. When we gather at table and say, “Christ is Lord,” we're saying something true. But when the crusaders said, “Christ is Lord,” as they slaughtered people, the statement became false. Truth is self-involving. After all, if Christ were Lord, you wouldn't have to resort to violence. The problem with the crusaders wasn't just that they were vicious or hypocritical, it's that they were no longer fighting for Jesus at all. They destroyed not only lives but truth.

That's a pretty dramatic example, but we can imagine the ways this plays out in more mundane settings in our lives, too. When we find ourselves in disagreements with others, we feel the temptation to drop our principles, if only for a moment, to make things easier. We tell ourselves that the ends justify the means, and if there's a gap between our ideals and actions, well, that's unfortunate. But we'll have time to fix it later for the really important stuff.

This is essentially the vision we get of Pilate in this story. Pilate stands in for evil in St. John's telling, but his wickedness isn't malicious as much as it is expedient. *What do I need to do to get through the day? How can I make this problem go away?* When Pilate leaves his headquarters to ask the religious leaders why they brought Jesus to him, you can imagine him muttering, “What is it now?”

In her biography of Pilate, Ann Wroe identifies Pilate's nadir not as his decision to crucify Jesus but his disinterest in engaging at all.² After all, Pilate has just been shown an alternative vision of ordering society. A cosmic realignment in which money and violence and greed don't rule the day and order our lives. When Jesus says that his kingdom is not from this world, Pilate could choose to ask, “So where is your kingdom from? Where does your authority come from? Why won't your followers fight for you?” Instead Pilate asks the question that is, Wroe's phrase, the “least interesting to pursue but the safest... to ask.” So you *are* a king? To put it another way, is this something I need to deal with or not?

Pilate's disinterest makes the character of Jesus all the more striking. Because in Jesus, there is no gap between ideals and actions. No neat parsing of means and ends. No just kicking the problem to somebody else. When Jesus refers to calls himself “the truth,” that's what he's getting at. He doesn't mean that he knows a lot. Or that he's a fact. He means that his life is perfectly coherent. There's no juggling of ends versus means, there's no distance between ideals and actions. His actions never falsify his teaching. And his teaching never negates his actions. His offers himself to us without

² Ann Wroe, *Pontius Pilate* (Random House Publishing Group, 2000).

having to argue or claim authority from anywhere beyond his life itself. Even in the shadow of death, the truth remains.

That was pretty dense, so we're probably wondering *What does this all have to do with us?* Well, let me give you two brief perspectives. The first is that the life of Jesus, and the life that Jesus gives to us, is a life free of anxiety over the worthiness of our calling. What's most striking about Jesus in this encounter with his Pilate is his calm. This isn't an indifference, but a kind of confidence that the calling Jesus has been given by the one he calls his Father is enough. It doesn't need Pilate's validation or the approval of others. It doesn't need a presentation on why you should take the public ministry of Jesus seriously. It doesn't need to be defended by his disciples.

And it's the same with us. You don't need to spend your life marshalling evidence for why the calling God has placed on your life is worthy. It doesn't need the approval or endorsement or affirmation of others. It is enough. God knows there's enough to be anxious about in the world. But we don't need to encounter others anxious about the worthiness of our lives.

The second perspective is that the life of Jesus, the life that Jesus gives to us, is a life of integrity. One of the remarkable parts of this encounter with Pilate and Jesus's life more broadly is that his orientation never changes. There isn't a kingdom of God for the disciples and a different one for the Pharisees and a different one for Pilate... There's no other Jesus to find out about later. What we see in Jesus is who God really is.

And Jesus gives us the ability to live with integrity, too. Integrity doesn't mean being perfect. But it means living so that our ideals align with our actions. And, more important, being honest about the places where they don't align.

To live free from anxiety about our relationship with God and with integrity toward our neighbors is to live in the truth of Christ the King and/or inhabit the Reign of Christ. After all, it's not right to say that Jesus is a king. But why would you want to say something right when you could say something true?

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor