

A King Who Rules Not in Tyranny But in Truth  
Reign of Christ Sunday, Year B, November 24, 2024  
John 18:33-37  
Choptank Charge      Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. As we gather on this Christ the King Sunday, also known as Reign of Christ Sunday, we find ourselves at a transition point. This is the last week of Lectionary Year B, during which our Gospel lessons mostly have been taken from Mark with a sprinkling of John. Next week, as we begin Advent, we turn to Lectionary Year C where the focus is on the Gospel of Luke. You may find it helpful to read Luke's Gospel from beginning to end, even though you likely know many of the stories that Luke records for us, such as the parables of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, and the sower.

Perhaps your first question this morning is simply, "What is Christ the King Sunday?" Good question! Unlike most holy days and seasons we observe, which stretch far back into Christian history, Christ the King Sunday was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. Although this celebration originally fell on the last Sunday of October, the date was changed during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to fall on the last Sunday prior to Advent.

The date between the two World Wars when this holy day was added to the church calendar is significant. In the midst of global turmoil, Pius wanted to speak out against the forces of secularism and totalitarianism. Rev. Dr. Lucy Lind Hogan observes:

The Pope felt that the followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world. They were choosing to live in the "kingdom" of the world rather than in the reign of God. ("Working Preacher," 2018).

Living in God's realm is clearly quite unlike living in the political regimes that Pope Pius wanted to counter. What was true in 1925 remains true today: Jesus' kingdom is very different from what we experience in our own form of democratic government, as well as other systems of governance around the world. So, as we prepare to celebrate Advent, which both looks ahead to his Second Coming as King of kings, and back to the birth of a child in Bethlehem, we are exploring what it means to live under the reign of God.

With these ideas in mind, let's turn to John 18:33-37, where we find Jesus before Pilate. In just a few hours, Jesus will be crucified. So what he says now is the culmination of what he is going to say about who he is and what he does. As the scene opens, Pilate is reentering the large complex known as the praetorium. Having failed to return Jesus' case to the Jewish authorities, who were seeking the death penalty, Pilate interrogated Jesus.

He first asks Jesus if he is "king of the Jews." Here, Pilate is asking the central question of the passion narrative. Pilate himself held the political position of prefect of Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea (*id yoo mee' uh*) from AD 26–36 under the Roman Emperor Tiberius. His duties included acting as supreme judge, overseeing tax collection, and maintaining law and order. We don't have to stretch our imaginations far to realize that Pilate was going to do all he could to keep the peace so that he could continue in his job. If the Jews, particularly the leadership, became unhappy with his rulings, a revolt was certainly possible. Pilate had to avoid that scenario at all costs.

After speaking with the Jewish leadership outside, Pilate reentered the praetorium. He got right to the point by asking Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" There could only be one

imperial leader in the Roman Empire, so if Jesus were to claim kingship, that would be a very weighty matter. Actually, it would be a disaster. Notice that as Jesus has done on other occasions, he doesn't answer the question directly, but deflects it by asking Pilate if that's what he thought, or if others had said that about him. **Pilate responds in a huff, asking if he is a Jew, which he is not.** He reminds Jesus that it is his own Jewish people who have handed him over. Their charge against Jesus is a political one, not a religious one. Pilate has to take this seriously. So he wants Jesus to tell him what he has done to prompt this action by the Jewish religious establishment.

Jesus answers Pilate's question, but not directly. He doesn't admit to having done anything. Instead, he says that his "kingdom is not from this world" (18:36). He goes on to say that if his kingdom were of this world, his followers would be fighting to prevent him from being "handed over." Then Pilate asks, "So you are a king?" Jesus says that he was born to "testify to the truth." He adds that those "who belong to the truth listen to [his] voice" (18:34).

What we see here is not Jesus denying his kingship, but rather he is making clear the source of his power. It does not come from the state or the people. No one appointed or elected him. Rather, it comes from God. He is doing God's bidding by testifying to the truth.

As Dr. Jamie Clark-Soles explains: "his kingdom has to do with the reign of love, not political expediency aimed at personal aggrandizement" ("Working Preacher," 2012). She goes on to contrast the reign of Pilate with the reign of Jesus. We can clearly see the difference between one who rules with tyranny and one who rules in truth:

- Pilate uses power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Pilate hoards power and lords it over people even to the point of destroying them, on a cross or otherwise. Jesus empowers others and uses his authority to wash the feet of those he leads. He spends his life on them, every last ounce of it; he gives his life to bring life.
- Pilate's rule brings terror, even in the midst of calm; Jesus' rule brings peace, even in the midst of terror (John 14:27; 16:33; 20:19-26).
- Pilate's followers imitate him by using violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nations. Jesus' followers put away the sword in order to invite and unify people, as Jesus does when he says "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32).
- Pilate's authority originates from the will of Caesar and is always tenuous. Jesus' authority originates from doing the will of God, and is eternal.

We have to probe further to find out what this kingdom of God is all about. Rev. Dr. Samuel Cruz helps us to better understand this kingdom. He writes:

Jesus tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world!" Many have interpreted this to mean that Jesus' kingdom is somewhere in heaven and not relevant to this world. To me, Jesus is saying that the values of his kingdom are different from those of the current system. In other words, Jesus does not have to exercise the type of authority that seeks to be on top, which results in oppression, corruption of the judicial system, and precisely the kind of hypocrisy that Pilate exhibited in the interaction between him and Jesus...

The values of Jesus' kingdom are so vastly different from those of this world

that often we Christians fail to understand them. The church, which purports to—and should—represent Jesus’ kingdom, is here to serve in humility rather than to seek earthly power. Jesus is the king, yet he does not arrive in a chariot, but on a donkey! Jesus is a king who is killed by those with societal power, not a king who is victorious over his enemies by defeating them in war. (“Working Preacher,” 2021).

Dr. Cruz mentions that Jesus’ values differ greatly from the values of the world. But what are his values? Where do we find them? You’ll recall from our study of the Gospels over the years I’ve been with you that Jesus often teaches in parables. The Gospel of Luke, which we will focus on when Lectionary Year C begins, includes 24 parables, 18 of which are unique to this Gospel. In contrast, Matthew contains 23 parables, 11 of which are unique to this Gospel. The shortest Gospel, Mark, includes 8 parables, only 2 of which are unique. In John’s Gospel, we find Jesus using signs, rather than parables to talk about God’s kingdom and to reveal his own identity.

In addition to the parables and signs, we find much of Jesus’ teaching about the values and ethics of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7. There is also an abbreviated version of the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26. Let’s see what we can learn from the Sermon as Matthew presents it.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 speak of meekness, mercy, pure-heartedness, and peacemaking. These are all essential kingdom values. As we move further into the sermon, we’re told not to be angry and to be reconciled with those against whom we have animosity. (Matthew 5:21-26). God’s people are not to retaliate, but instead should love their enemies (5:8-38). We’re also told to give alms, pray, and fast without making a show of our piety. (6:1-18). The person who lives by kingdom values stores up treasures in heaven (6:19-21), rather than here on earth as those who live by the world’s values do. Kingdom people also know they have to choose between two masters: God or mammon (that is, wealth). Jesus also reminds kingdom people not to worry; God will take care of us! Moving into chapter 7, we are told not to judge others, or profane what is holy (7:1-6). Jesus also warns us against self-deception and tells us that we can’t just be hearers of the word but that we must also be doers. We have to act on what we have been taught and know (7:24-27). Knowing the word is good and important, but it’s not enough!

John Hess Yoder writes a story of the kingdom from his own experience as a missionary. He points out how cultural values can relate in a positive way to kingdom values.

While serving as a missionary in Laos, I discovered an illustration of the kingdom of God. Before the colonialists imposed national boundaries, the kings of Laos and Vietnam reached an agreement on taxation in the border areas. Those who ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated them with Indian-style serpents were considered Laotians. On the other hand, those who ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated them with Chinese-style dragons were considered Vietnamese. The exact location of a person’s home was not what determined his or her nationality. Instead, each person belonged to the kingdom whose cultural values he or she exhibited. So it is with us: we live in the world, but as part of God’s kingdom, we are to live according to his kingdom’s standards and values (*Leadership* magazine).

We now need to ask ourselves, so what? What difference does it make if I live my life ruled by the leaders of this world, or if I live under the reign of God? Lucy Lind Hogan challenges us to answer for ourselves two important questions:

First, are we willing to accept Jesus as our king? We, too, are tempted by the allure of secularism and the power of the world. In the end, according to John, the Jewish leaders rejected their faith and bowed to the empire, “We have no king but the emperor” (John 19:15). In what ways do we bow to the empire?

Second, do we live in the reign of God following the servant king? Do we live lives that reflect that service? Do we reach out to the least and the lost? Do we seek to serve rather than be served? Do we testify to the truth of God? It is the truth that Jesus came to the world to bring love and forgiveness. Are we citizens of that kingdom? (“Working Preacher,” 2018).

So what say you? Are your actions, attitudes, and values aligned with the truth of God’s kingdom? Or are you mostly living in the earthly kingdom, pulled to and fro by those values that reflect the world’s standards, rather than those that reflect Jesus’ kingdom? Is your life focused on serving the least, last, and the lost as Jesus did? Or are you more concerned about increasing your own reputation and wallet? Are you demanding that people be treated fairly? Do you let your elected officials know that you expect them to exhibit high moral standards and engage in ethical behaviors? Your challenge this week is to mull over these questions and decide where your kingdom values and loyalties lie. If they need to be changed, what steps will you take to move closer to the reign of God?

Love, Nan