

Christ the King, Year B
Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

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Problem in the Text

As he was brought before the Roman governor for trial on charges of treason, Pilate asked, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered Pilate’s question about this charge, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked, “So you are a king?” There are a few ways to read that.

“So you **ARE** a king?” Jesus had told him he has a kingdom and Pilate perhaps responded that Jesus had just answered the harsh charges by the chief priests that Jesus had been fomenting insurrection against Rome. Or “So **YOU** are a king?” Pilate may have been reacting with incredulity that this average-looking, badly dressed individual claimed to be royalty. “So you are a **KING**?” Pilate would have heard some background about the cases brought before him that day – perhaps he had heard of the teaching, healings, and rising of the dead stories that surrounded Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate may have been surprised that this was the charge levied against Jesus. He may have wondered why the Jews wished to bring this case to the Roman authorities. Why not charge Jesus as a false prophet? The Jews could then handle his trial themselves. Why not simply charge him as a rebel? That would be easy for the Roman justice system to expedite. But his followers would not fight or stage an armed insurrection for Jesus. Pilate replied to Jesus, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Pilate hasn’t a clue who the Jew standing before him was or what he meant to the world.

Problem in the World

Today is the last Sunday of Pentecost, which is always the day on our church calendar in which we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the accumulation of all that we have learned since we began Advent last year. In many ways you can think of this day as our Final Exam. You have probably come to this day for many years and had different ways of marking it – either as someone un-churched, maybe some years you didn’t go to church either because you weren’t a member of a church at that time or because of other plans for the day. Maybe you slept in – that’s okay, you may have needed a good sleep-in that year. Perhaps you have been the duteous Christian and been in the front pew for Christ the King every year – belting out the hymns from memory. There is a wide range of taking in this day, from not at all, to stumbling upon it in the bulletin, “Oh, it’s Christ the King today!” To celebrating with the pageantry of the Festival Eucharist with three sacred ministers and sung gospel and all of the beautiful choir anthems. Don’t worry, it is all fine. Jesus will meet you wherever and however you are on this day each year. The world will spin around again for 365 days and you will get another opportunity to mark Christ the King. In fact, you get an opportunity each day to wonder about this person Jesus and why he is King, and why it might matter to each of us personally.

Kingship is kind of out of fashion in our world. The kings that do remain are mostly symbolic heads of state who are charged to uphold the traditions of their nations rather than actually lead them. They’ve been tamed. In the old days a king had absolute power and could lead by whim, sending people to the tower with an “off with their head!” They charged into battle with their armies to settle scores and for their honor. A country would suffer and bide its time under the rule of a weak or demented king. This nation was established after a war to throw off the yoke of a king, to become a great experiment of self-rule by the people and for the people. So we Americans really do not seek after kings (although we do seem to enjoy the highs and lows of other countries’ royals on the pages of People magazine.) What is a king good for in this day and age anyway? How would a king answer the issues of our times? The world is so very complicated, the forces of mayhem and destruction so near and insidious as they strike at everything that makes life worth living: freedom, music, good meals with friends. All these things were attacked in the cafes and concert halls of Paris, the beaches of Tunisia, a plane filled with tourists as they headed home tanned and relaxed after their trips to the resorts of Sharm-al Sheik. The leaders of this world are reaching for bigger missiles, tightening security, suspending liberties in the name of protection. We don’t need kings.

How would the kingship of Jesus answer these immediate concerns of safety? That is an essential question for us to consider; we are invited by the Gospel to enter into the Passion narrative and witness how Pilate reacts to the stranger before him: we need to answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” for the Pilates of the world who encounter Jesus and don’t know what he has done. It is okay to ask Jesus, “So **YOU** are a king?” Jesus is on trial, after all. He was on trial for claiming to be King, and he is still on trial today.

Grace in the Text

You may not have expected to be thinking about the passion when we are heading quickly into Thanksgiving and Christmas. But there it is – we are assigned a passage from St. John’s Gospel that confronts us with Jesus on trial and about his essential identity. I think Pilate was fairly certain that the Jewish leadership was trying out some political maneuver when they asked him to put Jesus on trial. I think he wanted to see how this game they were playing as they worked the system would play out. He asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate probably expected some whimpering and excuses from a prisoner who was facing the Roman authority and charges that would merit crucifixion. I don’t think he expected the answer Jesus gave him. Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world...” “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” This was something new. Was Jesus deranged, claiming to be a king of another world? But Jesus was speaking about truth and even extending an invitation to Pilate by telling him, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Wouldn’t Pilate, a learned man and powerful governor know truth? Jesus was someone who stymied Pilate. We know how the story goes in Gospel of St. John - that Pilate told the Chief Priests that he found no guilt in Jesus for treason. But Pilate did not have the background of what we have heard about Jesus all year long – about the healings, the miracles, and the teachings. Of course he will fail the test every time. He is stuck in this narrative loop of a drama that plays out in our church calendar year after year. Pilate will never know who Jesus was.

Grace in the World

For me, as I think about Jesus’ kingship and this day of Christ the King, it will feel like I am a member of an awesome and successful study group. The Church has this wonderful “cheat sheet” in which someone who has passed the test has boiled down all the essentials of what it means to claim Christ as King and to follow Him in this world: We call it the R reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows. The baptismal vows break down the elements of the Nicene Creed, an old tried and true review of orthodox faith from 325AD. Tip: the Creed is one of the things you should just go ahead and memorize. You will ace these questions: Who is God the Father? Who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Who is God the Holy Spirit? Then the baptismal vows move into how these beliefs influence how we demonstrate the faith in our daily lives. Such as: Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? The vow “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” really covers the remaining vows - Remember that one. You will want to join in for these renewals of Baptismal vows often, to review, stay sharp and be on top of how well you are doing in your faith life. This has been a trying couple of weeks for us all as we witnessed hate and fear and violence in the events in Paris and the aftermath. In a world such as this – how do we follow Christ as our King? How do we live into our Baptismal vows?

The video of the interview in Paris of a boy and his father the morning after the attacks outside the Bataclan Concert Hall where more than 80 people died: Interviewers asks if the boy (about 4 y.o.) understands what happened.

- The bad guys came and we will have to change houses.
- No, France is our home.
- But the bad guys are here, Papa.
- There are bad guys everywhere.
- But they have guns and they hurt people. We don’t have guns. (won’t we be destroyed if we stay?)
- No, we bought flowers. See, all the people are bringing flowers. (boy looks at people coming.)
- Will the flowers protect us?
- The flowers and the candles protect us. (Looks at father and smiles: he knows flowers are an odd thing to fight back with – but he can see how many people are coming and feels the power and truth of what his father has said.)
- Interviewer: Do you feel better?
- Yes, I feel much better.

This is not an overtly Christian exchange, but it is Christ-like. The reign of a King like Jesus is one that confuses the bad guys while it insists on loving our neighbor, insists on calling us to be peacemakers, insists that we honor the dignity of all human beings. Christ the King is an annual exam that we take. It is the end of term. We have read the book, we have listened to the lectures, we have been in study groups and small-group presentations to augment our understanding of the materials presented. We have each had plenty of time to prepare for this exam, and now the day is here. You may now pick up your pencils, turn the exam over and open your bluebooks... Let’s see if we can pass the final exam of the Church school year: There is really only one question for the final, but I will extend it out into three since you have been studying so hard: Who is our King? Jesus. Which King is ours? Jesus. Who is Jesus? Our King!

You have passed. Good luck on your future exams. Long may Jesus, Christ the King, reign in your hearts and minds! Amen.