

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/21/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Christ the King (Reign of Christ)

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, November 21st

John 18:33-37

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Clash of kingdoms

This Sunday is the final Sunday of the liturgical year. The text for this Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday from John's Gospel provokes questions about the nature of Jesus' kingship. The matter of Jesus as a king is first mentioned in John after the feeding of the five thousand. The people were about to seize Jesus to force Him to be their king and He had to slip away (6:15). Jesus knows we tend to enslave ourselves to cynical rulers who we allow to exert power and control over us as long as they keep us fed, give us the illusion of safety, and require no sacrifice from us. We see this even today in nations who have the freedom to elect their leaders. The kingship of Jesus is different. His authority as king does not originate from this world but from God. Jesus' Kingdom is about the rule of love and how this is the antithesis of the coercion and oppression of fragile worldly kingdoms. But sometimes our allegiance to worldly powers leads us to deny God's kingship, even though we might not realize it. As believers in the world, we have no choice but to have a foot in both kingdoms, but which king do we truly serve?

John 18:33-37 Commentary

The lectionary makes a dramatic shift from Mark's Gospel, and we now find John's account of Jesus standing in front of Pilate – the representative of the greatest worldly power at that time. For context, the following events have just occurred: The betrayal and arrest of Jesus (18:1-11), Jesus questioned by Annas (18:12-14), Peter denied Jesus (18:15-18, 25-27), and Jesus questioned by Caiaphas (18:19-24). It was Caiaphas had advised the Jews that it was better for one man to die for the people (18:14). Immediately preceding the assigned text, Jesus was led to Pilate's headquarters (18:25-32). The delegation of Jews remained outside Pilate's headquarters so as not to be ritually defiled and thus be unable to eat the Passover meal. Pilate had to step outside to hear their accusation:

²⁹ So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"

³⁰ They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." ³¹ Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."

The lectionary text begins:

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

Pilate's primary concern here is whether Jesus is a threat to Rome. Was Jesus a rival king to challenge the Roman puppet kings for power in Judea? Jesus' response indicates He is aware of the politics involved and how His enemies are attempting to use Pilate to do their dirty work. Jesus now takes over the role of interrogator by His question in v.34.

³⁵ *Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?"*

Pilate reveals his scorn for the Jews (in John this refers predominantly to the Jewish leaders and those who work on their behalf), yet despite his reluctance, he is about to do their bidding. Pilate does not know why the Jewish leaders want Jesus dead and suspects there is some hidden agenda. Pilate asks Jesus to explain what is going on.

³⁶ *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."*

Jesus confirms His kingship but explains how His kingdom is not of this world and thus is no threat to Pilate. Jesus uses as evidence that His followers have made no attempt to resist His arrest. Jesus was not interested in an insurrection. Despite the appearances, Jesus was not the victim but faithfully followed the will of the Father. Jesus' authority came from God.

³⁷ *Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."*

Pilate is focused only on his primary interests. Hearing Jesus use the term "kingdom" alarms Pilate. Even though Jesus spoke of a kingdom not of this world, Pilate is still concerned that it may have political ramifications. Jesus then responds with the nature of His kingship. The opening themes of John's Gospel are now restated: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (1:1) and "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (1:14). The truth is a major theme in John's Gospel. The latter part of v.37 echoes the theme of chapter 10—how the sheep know their shepherd's voice. Anyone of the truth listens to Jesus.

³⁸ *Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"*

Verse 38 is not included in the lectionary but seems to be inseparable to the text. Pilate responds with a cynical question – "*What is truth?*"

Reflections

This amazing scene portrayed in the lectionary text contrasts worldly kingdoms with Christ's Kingdom. Here is Jesus surrounded by the trappings of Pilate's headquarters in Jerusalem. This building and this man served as symbols of Rome's might and splendor. Rome dominated Judea. Jesus, on the other hand, lacked any form of worldly status. He had just been handed over to Pilate by the chief priests to seek His death. Yet this scene reveals something more than meets the eye. It was the Jewish leaders, in fear of their own status which Jesus threatened, who were powerless to kill Him without the permission of Pilate. The mighty Pilate was also acting out of fear. The fragility of Pilate's position was revealed. He would do anything to maintain law and order, even if it meant being used by the Jews to do their dirty work. Despite the contrast in worldly status between Pilate and Jesus, who was interrogating who? The only person acting without fear was Christ. God's authority reigned. God's will was being done.

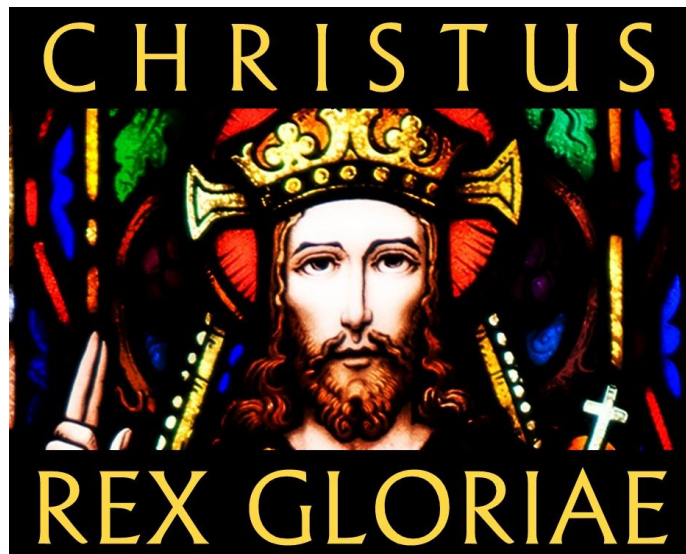
Not long after this scene, Jesus would be crucified, buried, resurrected on the third day, and be glorified. A few years later, Pilate was either executed or committed suicide in exile c.39 A.D. The priestly class was completely eradicated with the total destruction of the Temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D. The Romans and the Sanhedrin are but memories. Christ is still our king.

Pilate's question is perhaps more relevant today than it was in Pilate's day. Absolute truth is no longer recognized in our postmodern world. The truth is what each of us say it is. Indeed, the idea of an absolute truth is offensive. Some aspects of the institutional church have responded by distorting the truth of the Gospel to fit the culture. On the other hand, there are those in the church who seek to impose their specific view of Gospel orthodoxy that was interpreted and defined by a previous culture in a different place on today's world. What is truth?

Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders, and their response was to choose to preserve their own status rather to accept His message. Their collective response later in the unfolding dialog with Pilate was, "*We have no king but Caesar*" (19:15b). Jesus confronted Pilate and he chose to do the same. He was forced out of fear to act in a way contrary to his conscience. Christ has challenged every generation since. The recent pandemic was one of those inescapable moments which revealed our true king. For some parts of the church, the pandemic revealed their true king was Caesar. The lure of status can be irresistible. Fear can often cloud our judgment. For others, the idolatry of self-worship and putting individual rights and freedoms above the ends of the church became the focus. Under the guise of religious rights, people began to do what was right in their own eyes. They were, in fact, their own kings of their own castles with their own truths.

When Christ reigns in our hearts we serve a king like no other. Christ is a king who is not seeking power and glory, but humble service to others. Those of us who claim to be members of the Church universal should seek to engage in such humble service to others, to be the hands and feet of Christ. Those who seek the truth must embrace the values of Christ's Kingdom which contrast radically with our culture of self-idolatry. Those who seek power and status at the expense of others reject Jesus' Kingdom.

Christ the King Sunday is an opportunity to reflect, both individually and as a church, which king we really serve. This last Sunday of the liturgical year can serve as an annual practice of assessing personal and congregational mission and values to ensure we are pointing in the direction Christ our King has commanded and what this specifically entails in our time and place.



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