

St. Barnabas, Florissant
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TRUTH ABOUT KINGS

The Last Sunday after Pentecost is known as Christ the King Sunday. It wraps up the long Pentecost season and points ahead to the season of Advent, which begins next Sunday. Advent is all about the coming of Christ's reign, be it his second coming at the end of time *or* his first coming in Bethlehem *or* his coming into our lives right now. So, this is a pivotal Sunday.

In Year B (which officially ends today) the gospel lesson for Christ the King Sunday is the interview between the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Jesus has been arrested and convicted of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah. Since that is a capital crime and only the Romans could authorize capital punishment, Jesus has been brought to Pilate. Pilate begins by asking Jesus whether he in fact is the King of the Jews. Now, Jesus knows what that title means to the Romans: it is political and military; it is treasonous because the Roman emperor is their king. So, Jesus replies that his kingdom is not "from this world," meaning it not political. Where is there any evidence of his disciples taking up arms to rebel against the emperor?

Pilate asks an obvious question: "So....you are a king?" In other words—if Jesus' kingdom is not political, then what kind of king is he? This does not compute! Jesus answers enigmatically: he was born to be a *witness to the truth*. His kingship is one of truth-telling and of manifesting the truth in his very being and in all his actions.

Our lesson stops one verse short of Pilate's famous reply, which was: "What is truth?" For two thousand years now people have debated whether he was being cynical and dismissing the very notion that there is any such thing beyond the realities of this world, such as Roman power. Or was Pilate genuinely interested in exploring the whole idea of a higher truth? Immediately after this interview he goes out to the crowd and tells them that he finds no case against Jesus. He proposes to release Jesus in honor of the Passover feast. They would have none of that, and insisted on the release of the terrorist, Barabbas.

Therefore, our text challenges us to ask Jesus and ourselves whether he is a king—our king. First, however, we must make sure we know what we mean by the word “king.” We live in a world with very few kings—a least very few that wield absolute power like kings in the first century did. Ancient kings embodied their kingdom. They were the kingdom. Kingdoms in the ancient world were not defined so much by boundaries, as by who accepted a monarch’s authority and power. There was a saying that a kingdom extends only as far as the “king’s writ runs.” What that means is that when the king’s officials come to a village they read a proclamation called a writ, which summoned the elders to pay taxes or gather to hear the king’s edicts or to serve as jurors in the king’s court. If the elders of the village obeyed the writ, then that village was under the king’s reign and part of his kingdom. If they refused and could get away with it, then obviously the king’s writ didn’t run that far, and they were not part of his kingdom.

What do we mean if we claim that Jesus is our king? It is the same question as what we mean when we proclaim that Jesus is our Lord. Does it not mean that he exercises authority over us, that his writ runs as far as where we live? Does that not mean that we are accountable to him for how we live our lives? Does it not imply that we will gather together whenever his holy writ—the gospels are read so that we might hear his edicts and that we might attend his court, that we might sit at our king’s table?

So, Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, not a political one. Pilate is obviously confused. What sort of king is this? Jesus replies that his kingdom is where truth is told—the truth about reality itself, and Pilate doesn’t have a clue what he is talking about. The big question for us is: do we? How do we understand the very nature of reality—in short, what is our answer to Pilate’s question: *What is truth?*

Elsewhere in the *Gospel of John* Jesus says that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In the end that is the answer to Pilate: *Jesus is our truth*. As Christians, we believe that all reality is rooted in a Triune Being, Who became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Everything that exists reflects God’s being, God’s truth. We have access to that being, that truth *in Jesus*. That truth is our polar star, our map, our marching orders. Instead of being frightened by that claim, we are heartened by it, because in his life,

death and resurrection he reveals a God, Who loves us and intends great things for us. That is the good news, and the reason why we can rejoice on this day that Christ is indeed our King.

Alas, that is not the end of the story. Despite Pontius Pilate's finding no fault with Jesus and giving in only to quiet the mob, it did not take the Roman government very long to realize that Jesus' execution did not rid them of his presence. He was still very much alive in the hearts and minds of Christian believers. They were willing to give up their lives to serve this risen King Jesus. He was their sovereign lord, *not* Caesar, *not* the Roman Empire. After two hundred years of trying to stamp out Christianity, suddenly in 311 the Emperor Constantine decided to embrace Christianity as the savior of his empire. Christians were astounded and elated. The lowly had overthrown the mighty. But, they soon learned that the price of their new freedom from persecution and death was a cultural captivity. King Jesus now looked a lot like the holy Roman emperor, defender of the faith.

I will spare you the history lesson of what it has meant for Christians to live in what has been called *Christendom*. It is clear that in most of the world today that reality has passed. Political authorities no longer rule in the name of Jesus, much less in the spirit of Jesus. The issue of rendering unto Caesar only what is legitimately his and to God what belongs to Him is now very much with us. Much of the great debates whirling around us involve different views of what belongs to God and what to Caesar.

Yet, for most of us that debate is still pretty confusing, pretty abstract. What is closer to home is a much more subtle claim on our lives. If kingship has to do with what charts the course of our lives, then we have to look at our culture. How do we spend our time and our money? What influences shape our values and our behavior? Can we honestly say that it is King Jesus? For most Americans it is our consumerist culture. Do not most Americans take their cues for life from advertising and from their friends rather than from their Christian faith?

So, I leave us all—myself included—with something to ponder about in Advent. It really is a very simple question: *to what extent does Jesus call the shots in our lives? How far does his writ run in our lives? Is he truly our Lord and our King?* You will have to think about this question amidst non-stop advertising for Christmas

shopping and blaring Christmas carols and all the hustle and bustle of getting ready for the holidays. But, if you and I can faithfully wrestle with this question about Jesus' kingship in our lives, then I can guarantee you that Christmas this year will have a spiritual depth to it greater than ever before. AMEN.