

**“The History behind the Reign of Christ Sunday
and What It Implies for Us”**

John 18:33-38a

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Most of us in this church know we follow the Christian year and read texts associated with each Sunday in it, but we may or may not know much about the history of this practice or the origin of specific days that receive special recognition. We know the year is shaped by the story of Jesus, and we know a good bit about Christmas and Easter, perhaps even a little about Ash Wednesday and Pentecost, but a day like today – The Reign of Christ – is not particularly well known. Yet, it has a high and holy purpose which becomes incredibly clear when we know something about the context that inspired it.

The Reign of Christ, or Christ the King, as it was initially called, is one of the newest feast days we have, having been established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. It was the year Adolf Hitler’s autobiographical work *Mein Kampf* was published, a book written while he was in prison the year before, detailing his hatred of Jewish people, belief in the superiority of the Aryan race, and plan to take over the world.

It was also a time when a spirit of nationalism and isolationism was growing in the aftermath of the Great War. The Ku Klux Klan had become the largest fraternal organization in the U.S., with five million members. A year later 40,000 Klansmen marched in Washington, demanding, among other things, immigration restrictions based on race and nationality (*The Christian Century*, November 24, p. 29).

Pope Pius XI instituted the feast day of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe to counter this spirit of unhealthy nationalism and ethnocentrism. He called the church to recognize Christ’s lordship over all creation; the Christian’s first allegiance to Christ and not any nation, group, or party; and the calling to live by Jesus values over and above any national or cultural values. One feast day did not prevent the Holocaust, but at least the church was not silent.

Everything about the context that led to this day seems eerily familiar nearly 100 years later. Unhealthy nationalism, ethnocentrism, the demand for race-related immigration restrictions, racism and fascism on the rise. And the Christian response named still seems appropriate — to underscore the sovereignty of Christ. In fact, this is the purpose of the entire Christian year — our lives are to be shaped more by the Jesus story than by secular events. Yet the challenge comes not simply in response to the troubling realities of the world around us, but in regard to our own hearts and lives. We may say our loyalty to Christ comes before any other loyalty, but an honest assessment of the choices we make every day suggests that other priorities win out quite often.

What does it mean for Christ to be sovereign in our lives, as opposed to us saying he is? If Christ is King, exactly what kind of king is he? And how might the world be different if everyone who claimed to follow Jesus did, or at the very least, genuinely wanted to more than anything else in the world?

Our reading from John 18 provides substantive content to inform our exploration of these questions. It presents a familiar scene wherein Jesus is asked if he is a king. The text moves us toward the cross which may seem like an odd choice for the Reign of Christ, but it isn't. It fits quite well with the Christian view of how Christ reigns, not through coercive power but through sacrificial love.

The scene begins with Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect or governor of Judea, summoning Jesus to the praetorium, his headquarters. “Are you the King of the Jews?” he asks him. The term “king” is loaded with political and therefore insurrectional meaning for the Romans. There can be no king other than Caesar. Jesus would be wise to avoid a direct answer, and he does, but not out of fear. He replies, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate could say, “I’m asking the questions here! You are the one on trial!” But he doesn't. He says, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Now, not all Jewish people are hostile toward Jesus who is Jewish, like all his disciples. Some leaders have turned on him and sent him to

the Roman authorities who make the decision to put him to death. At this point, Pilate is simply saying, “Look, this isn’t my issue. I’m not one of you. But it is my problem now because I’ve got to work with your people, some of whom don’t like you. Why is that; do you know?”

Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not of/from this world. If it were... my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” In other words, I’m not that kind of king. Jesus distances himself from the traditional expectation for a political deliverer who rules by force. He is not disinterested in political issues. He just doesn’t want political power.

“So, you are a king?” Pilate says, to which Jesus replies, “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.” At this point, Pilate, perhaps exasperated, says, “What is truth?” Most scholars assume he says this dismissively. “Truth... phew...” But the text doesn’t inform us in any way about his tone of voice. It’s like reading an email or text, as opposed to being with someone, hearing their voice, and reading their body language. We have to guess.

I think of the scene in “The Martian” when Mark Watney receives unsettling news about how he might return home and then replies, “Are you kidding me?” Back on earth Vincent Kapoor suggests he may be saying (with curiosity), “Are you kidding me?” as opposed to (with sarcasm), “Are you kidding me?” Does Pilate say “(with curiosity) What is truth?” or “(with sarcasm) What is truth?” We don’t know.

What we do know is that all this “truth” language is loaded in John. It is a theme that runs through the Gospel. It’s not just about ordinary truth, though this is part of the story. The Greek word *aletheia* refers to something that can be relied on, that which has certainty and force, authenticity. And Jesus comes to bring all these things. He does not make false claims or tell outright lies.

But in John there is more going on with this language. John says the Word-Made-Flesh is full of grace and *truth* (1:14). Jesus is the way, the *truth*, and the life (14:6). And Jesus asks God to sanctify his followers in the *truth* (17:17, 19). The truth is not simply a set of factual claims proven to be accurate. It is a divine encounter, a holy reality. Jesus’ followers know the *truth*, and the *truth* will set us free (8:31-32)!

In our text, Jesus says that everyone who belongs to the truth — meaning what is trustworthy but also *who* is trustworthy, as in him — all who belong to him listen to his voice, which is to say, they follow him and his teachings. When a parent says to us as children, “Do you hear what I am saying?” or “Listen to me!” they don’t mean, “Can you hear the words!” They mean, “Do what I tell you to do.” Those who belong to Jesus and thus are under his reign do what he tells them to do.

It takes time to sort through this convoluted dialogue. Where is the straightforward Mark when we need him? But the message is clear. Jesus reigns not through any national or political realm but in our hearts and lives. Those who embrace this reign will have nothing to do with false claims and outright lies, they will seek the truth in all things — the ideas and facts that are trustworthy, and most of all, the Christ who is the most trustworthy of all. Those who come under Christ’s sovereignty will follow his teachings, even if they come into conflict with powerful cultural messages. That’s what it means for Christ to reign.

To be more precise, Christ reigns in our hearts when we overcome the temptation to seek revenge against our enemies and practice forgiveness. Christ reigns in our hearts when we realize we cannot serve God and money, because when push comes to shove, something or someone will come first. Christ reigns in our hearts when we love our neighbor, including the one who doesn’t look, talk, or believe like us. Christ reigns in our hearts when we feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner.

This may all sound incredibly obvious, but not only do we live in a time when many seem to have no interest in the truth, the vast majority of our part of the church, evangelicals, have come to embrace leaders who follow the exact opposite of Jesus’ teaching — seeking revenge, worshiping wealth, blaming the poor for their poverty, extending hostility to the stranger, and demonizing prisoners. It’s why one of the most passionate evangelical leaders, who died this week, Tony Campolo, said a few years ago that he no longer could identify as an evangelical.

There are competing forces at work in this world, all claiming to speak for what is true and right. But Jesus’ teachings are not hidden,

they are not secret, they are available for all to hold up to the light of day and measure everything by accordingly. Those who follow them seek to make him Lord. But they are swimming upstream in this time. I suppose they always have been.

I have told some of you about a predecessor of mine in a previous setting who preached a sermon in the 1960s on the brotherhood of all men. The language was gender exclusive, a sign of that time and the reality that human understanding is always evolving, but it was still a courageous statement about racial equality.

At the end of the service, one of the most prominent members of the church, a powerful political leader in this state, said, “Preacher, you said something today I don’t ever want to hear you say again. You said that n—ger is my brother. I don’t ever want to hear you say that again.” The pastor replied calmly, saying, “Well then, the way I see it, you have two choices. You can convince me that I’m wrong, which I don’t think you can do. Or you can quit coming to church here.” The man walked off in a huff but continued coming to church as often as he had before.

How can people who call themselves “Christians” hold on to blatantly racist beliefs? How can people who call themselves “Christians” spew hatred toward immigrants and lie about them, allow women to be harassed and abused? We are all works-in-progress; none of us is perfect. We are all products of our time. But in every generation Christians have to decide who reigns in their hearts — Christ or someone or something else.

Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says this, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers (Matthew 7:21-23)’.” Only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven... Doing God’s will is what Christ’s reign is about. We pray every week, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” May it be so in, through, and beyond our lives! Amen!