

Who is Your King? What is Your Truth?  
Christ the King Sunday  
Nov. 22, 2009

Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Revelation 1:4-8  
John 18:33-37

Today is Christ the King Sunday, also known as the Reign of Christ Sunday. With it, we bid goodbye to what our liturgical calendar calls “ordinary time” and we prepare ourselves for one of the great festival seasons in the Christian life.

Advent begins next week, the four-week season leading us to Christ’s birth. We’ve barely had enough time to digest our Thanksgiving dinners before we’re turning our hymnals to our favorite carols. Thanks be to God.

In my former life as a communications professional, I was a big believer in that most fundamental approach to any kind of communication, but especially speeches and presentations. It’s a very simple outline: Tell them what you’re going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you told them.

In a sense the church follows that approach, cycling and recycling through the years, repeating the same familiar seasons and festivals, providing us a rhythm that stands apart from the secular calendar.

Today in worship, for instance, the liturgical calendar calls us to consider Christ as king, ruler over all nations, princes and principalities, crowned in glory, at the height of his power. But then next week, we start over again, preparing for a baby to be born in a manger, a poor, unknown infant belonging to unknown parents in a little, out of the way place the world would otherwise forget.

By following this holy rhythm, it’s as if the church is telling us what the story will be, it tells us the story and then it tells us what the story was again. It’s a story worth repeating. But, even so, we should acknowledge that, as with some speeches or even some sermons, we tune out sometimes amid our busy and distracted lives. So, in that sense, it’s good that the church takes this remedial approach.

The world has never fully understood Jesus, never has known quite what to do with the truth he brought into the world. Theologians have said we can think of Jesus in three roles. As a prophet, who told us of the world to come and how to treat each other in the meantime. As a priest, who stands at the head of the church. And, also, as a king.

It's that last one – the kingship of Christ – that we struggle the most with, I think. That's especially true here in America, isn't it, given our national history with kings and queens?

Last spring, NBC launched a new TV series, called "Kings", about a fictional future kingdom, populated with people who seemed otherwise to be American. The main characters were the royal family. Some viewers saw direct parallels to the stories about Saul and David from the book of 1 Samuel in the Bible. But the show was cancelled after only a few months. I'm no TV critic but I wonder if part of the problem was that we Americans can't quite picture ourselves as being ruled by a monarchy. It just doesn't sit well with us. It doesn't fit our sense of national identity.

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Those who use the word Christian to claim their identity have a different challenge with this language of Christ as king. We've long struggled to reconcile our allegiance to Christ with our allegiance to the powers of this world. And the powers of this world have long struggled with what to do about Christ.

That is Pontius Pilate's dilemma in the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. He is paid to maintain Roman rule in the region of Judea, which for the most part means maintaining peace and order.

He recognizes right away that this trouble between Christ and his persecutors could get out of hand. Some of the Jewish leaders want Christ out of the way because the truth he is preaching doesn't fit their understanding. So they try to make their problem Pilate's problem by bringing Christ before the Roman ruler and accusing him of treason.

But Pilate wants no part of it. So, he dodges responsibility with that timeless art of answering a question with another question.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus.

But Jesus is every bit as good at this rhetorical strategy. He responds with his own question, "Do you ask this on your own or because someone told you about me?"

Pilate tries again, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

But at this point, Jesus has had enough, and it is time to tell the truth, a truth that Pilate can handle no better than the established religious leaders of the day.

“My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus says. “If it were, you and your armies would have your hands full just trying to manage the hordes of people fighting you and everyone else to keep me here, rather than being handed over to die. THAT is my truth. THAT is my message.”

“You ask what I have done,” Jesus essentially says to Pilate. “What I’ve done is what I was born to do – to tell this truth. And those who belong to this truth listen to my voice.”

At this point, it’s safe to say that at this point Pilate really wants no part of this. Every time I read this story, I think of that line from the movie *A Few Good Men* when the Jack Nicholson character says, “You can’t *handle* the truth.”

Pilate really can’t handle the truth of who Jesus is. He’s got to make a tough call and he doesn’t have much time to think about it: Either this Jesus is a king like no other king or he is a two-bit crackpot that deserves what he gets from these people who are after him. He makes his decision, and, as we know from the rest of the story, he gets rid of the problem as quickly and cleanly as he can.

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The world has never fully understood Jesus, never has known quite what to do with the truth he brought into the world. Pilate washed his hands of it. So we are left to answer these questions ourselves: Who is our king? What is our truth?

Who is our king? Who is *your* king?

One reason that question gives us such a hard time is that we can’t get our minds around what kind of king Jesus was and is. He was and is a king unlike any other we will ever know. Writing about this passage in the Gospel of John, Roger Nishioka offers this helpful thought.

“Proclaiming the truth, being the truth, and even belonging to the truth are what make Jesus a king. His kingdom – his nation – is not defined by earthly terms,

but neither is some ethereal, imaginary concept. Jesus comes from and belongs to God's kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear that familiar three-fold beat in that statement? Jesus proclaims the truth, he is the truth and he belongs to the truth. Maybe it's that last one – that Jesus belongs to the truth - that sets Jesus apart the most. He was and is a king that points to something larger, a kingdom and a God that, even as a king, causes him to fall on his knees and bow down in obedience.

Stop and think about how the world has treated some of its national and political leaders who demonstrate that same kind of humble sense of self and sense of place and sense of kingdom identity - those who tie their nation's future to the future of other nations and other kingdoms. Plenty have said the words, which always sound good. But far fewer have actually done it and lasted very long afterward.

On the other hand, think of leaders who have reached the height of power either through, nationalism, colonialism or imperialism ... or simply by sinking fear into the hearts of their people, fear that will cause the people to agree with anything.

So what does all this suggest for which kingdom you and I belong to and where we place our allegiance? That may sound like a brainy question only a theologian could love. But it becomes real if, for example, we ask why we have an American flag in the sanctuary, a space where we gather each week to pledge our lives to God and recognize God's sovereign power.

Perhaps, just in this one instance, with today's story from the Gospel of John in mind, we might ask: What would Jesus do?

And what about our lives and the work we do in the name of our king and his kingdom? If even Jesus said he belongs to something larger, what do we do with the challenges and problems of this world? Do our efforts in God's name amount to anything?

Our nights with the homeless early mornings fixing them breakfast? Our teaching and mentoring kids and supporting parents at Merry Oaks elementary? Our striving to be welcoming and inclusive to all? Our efforts to speak up for justice in the city and in the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, p. 334

How do we stay focused on working in this earthly kingdom, when results can so often be hard to find, and, at the same time, hold fast to the truth of something so large and grand it even humbles our Lord and king, Jesus Christ?

In other words, how do we reconcile our sometimes limited progress in God's kingdom on earth with the truth that our hopes for the world will be fulfilled?

As I pondered that question this week, a wise friend shared these words: the great hope of the Kingdom is the true basis for all our little hopes for which we work. It is important not to confuse the two but it is also important not to separate them.

He went on to say that the passage of the Civil Rights bill was a great thing, the outcome of the toil and courage, life and death of generations of people whose cause was equal rights.

Within the long march of human civilization it was an example of limited but real progress, my friend said. I will be the first to say that, on one hand, the Civil Rights bill doesn't seem like a little hope or limited progress. But it is little only in comparison to the great hope we have in Jesus Christ, whom we call king, and that hope is what motivates us to keep working for racial equality.

So we can continue on, keeping close the words of the Confession of 1967:

"With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement in the final triumph of God."

Here at Caldwell, we might say that with an urgency born of this hope, we make our final preparations to send our vision team to Guatemala. We plan Sunday school curriculum for our growing children's ministry. We visit the sick and shut-in. We celebrate birthdays with men one step away from homelessness, but a huge step at that.

With an urgency born of this hope, we pray for guidance as to how God would have us use our education building in God's service. We reach across ecumenical and multi-faith borders to deepen relationships and understanding.

With an urgency born of this hope, we give thanks for new members and seek to engage them in the life of the church. We house service agencies in our buildings and so much more.

The world has never fully understood Jesus, never has known quite what to do with the truth he brought into the world. Nor has the world known what to do with those who listen to Christ's voice.

Just as Christ pointed to something even larger and more important than himself, the peculiar truth we claim is that, in all of our work, we achieve progress that is limited, yes, but progress that points to the limitless power of our God, whose words we find in the Revelation to John:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord, the beginning and the end, the one who is and was and who is to come, the Almighty. Amen