

Practicing Peace (John 18:33-37)

Dr. Keith D. Herron, Intentional Interim Minister

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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Christ the King Sunday (2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12 (13-18); Revelation 1:4b-8)

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/practicing-peace

John 18:33-37 (NIV)

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

We could call this a scene from Night Court when Jesus was hauled into court where this court transcript was recorded. The conversation between Jesus and Pilate may be one of the most intriguing conversations in the Bible because it is truth speaking to power, and power subsequently quizzing truth to the nature and authority of truth's claims.

The opening lines of Revelation says Jesus is *"the one who is and was and who is to come."* It was John's answer in Revelation to the harsh realities of his time (Revelation 1:8). It was his answer to the lesser claims of mortal kings and rulers. John's vision was a word of hope about everything in our time set against the reign of God. Jesus traveled throughout the countryside, through every city and village, preaching and demonstrating the liberating good news of the kingdom of God. There are many sayings in the gospels, here's one: *"The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you"* (Luke 17:20-21).

The Kingdom of God is God's reign, not over a country or a group of people but over the whole of human history. It is not about a geographical country nor a particular race or ethnicity. There's no clearer image of the kingship of Christ than in John's powerful images of vindication and triumph. In this passage (essentially a prayer) John envisions the power of a Jesus who *"is coming with the clouds."* The prayer is both tender and terrifying. Jesus stands at the beginning and end of all time and in all times in between. God's realm does not settle on boundaries we

make, such as a particular version of the Christian faith we might endorse. The reign of God is not about a sentimental vagueness that requires nothing of us except that we try to be nice. God's realm is not a national or political entity. It is a community in God's care that lives in radical love, joy, peace, truth, and righteousness.¹

On this day, Christ the King Sunday, we think of the entire Christian year, of our faith, of creation, of history, of the God who is all in all, and of the Christ who will rule over all. We think of the coming end of time and we submit to Christ as our sovereign, believing with Paul that on that day *"every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God"* (Philippians 2:10-11).

On this Sunday we can imagine worshipers in a massive throne room with trumpeters in the balconies and bright banners hanging from the rafters, with attendants in festive costumes lining the walls while a royal entourage surrounds a great throne.

Now stretch your imagination and put this vision in our own sanctuary with an elegant throne for this occasion. In our worship we invite all God's children to worship the Lord Jesus Christ enthroned where He is destined to sit. John's vision helps us imagine him surrounded by the apostles robed in white for extra effect.

In our imagination we see this as a day when mere mortals have an audience with the Lord of life. What would you say to him? Better yet, what would he say to you?

In the days before the exile, the ancient Jews gathered once a year in the temple to crown Yahweh as God to symbolize God's rule over all the people. Just as the smoke of the incense ascended to the highest reaches of the great vaulted ceiling, worship was directed vertically, accompanied by the smell of burning sacrifices and music echoing in the rafters. All this was meant to symbolize the deepest intentions of the prayerful faithful.

Yet perhaps the heightened sense of God's presence is best found outside the sanctuary, where Jesus is king not in places of power, but in all the places where people try to serve him. Perhaps we will see him most vividly not among those who choose violence as a sign of power, but among those who practice peace.

Jesus is king not only where people seek advantage, but where people seek to be helpful; not where people seek security, but in a working and breathing community.

We struggle with the idea that we serve another kingdom if we're to be faithful followers of Jesus. When Jesus insisted his kingdom was "not of this world," he didn't mean it was merely spiritual nor relegated to a future age just over the horizon of time or even that he was speaking of heaven where all things are eventually made right.

He was speaking of a reign that runs counter to most of what we experience in life no matter what your political persuasions. Jesus was talking about the push-pull we feel whenever we

¹ Adapted from "Reflections on the lectionary," Frank A. Thomas, *Christian Century*, 11/3/2021

attempt to make Christ king in our hearts and lives. It's that tension we feel whenever we realize the kingdoms of this world are empty of meaning and limited by sin.

Daniel Clendenin says, "In its simplest terms, the kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. Every aspect of personal and communal life would experience a radical reversal. The political, economic, and social subversions would be almost endless – peacemaking instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation ... mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed ... embrace rather than exclusion, etc. The ancient Hebrews had a marvelous word for this kind of life: Shalom, or human well-being."²

Maybe you're sitting there thinking all this is a pie-in-the-sky way of believing not grounded in reality. That's okay. If we take up this way of thinking, things have to change. We might have to give up some important piece of our lives in ways that we simply can't or won't do. It's too much for many believers who continue to live in the world that Christ came to change.

I hear you because the only way I can name your weakness is to identify mine. If I changed and you changed, it would make a difference. If you and I changed and we convinced others to change, what could happen? It would be nothing short of the kind of revolution Jesus came to start.

Call it a conspiracy if you must. But whatever you do, don't discount the idea because of cynicism or sarcasm or even an admitted weak faith. Whatever you do, don't water down the notion as undoable – push yourself to the brink to think just how doable it really is. Give God's kingdom a chance to flourish in your corner of the world. The power of Christ the King Sunday is the power to imagine a different world!

Maybe then the subversive prayer of Jesus can be prayed by all of us, "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" Maybe, just maybe, that's why Jesus stood before the government's man and let him talk till he found the justification he needed to fend off the political accusations of weakness the Jews used to make him do what they wanted.

This is good news! If Jesus is king not just once a year and on a throne but throughout all of time and in every place, then we don't have to be king or seek another king. We no longer have to judge one another. We don't have to control what other people think or feel or force them to fit our expectations.

When that happens, the kingdom of God is here and now, here in our hearts, here among us – and out there wherever we extend Christ's reign.

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² Clendenin, *ibid.* <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/index.shtml#LectionaryEssay>