



“Behold, Your King!”

John 18:33-37

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Today is last Sunday of the Liturgical year. It is called “Christ the King Sunday” and is intended to serve as a climax and summary of the entire church year.

However, the title, “Christ the King,” is often misunderstood, and the idea of the Lordship of Christ is easily abused. Some object to the language of the day. It is, after all, masculine, and at the same time magisterial and, therefore, misses the character of the Christian faith.

Over the centuries and still today, many Christians use Christ the King as an opportunity for triumphalist behavior and considerable Christian arrogance. Too often, Christianity proclaims *itself* Lord and oppresses others.

Happily, our Gospel Lesson is an appropriate corrective to both the misunderstanding and abuse connected to the Christian belief that Christ is king. As always, however, we must be careful to let this lesson interpret us rather than indulge in our tendency to stand over biblical texts to interpret and judge them. This story, like all the biblical stories, wants to say something to us – if we will submit to it and listen.

The Gospel Lesson from John 18 is part of a larger narrative – the Roman trial of Jesus. John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate is a masterful seven-act narrative filled with various levels of irony. In fact, this story is sometimes used in literature classes as a classic example of dramatic irony.

John, unlike the other gospel writers, is concerned with interpreting the meaning of Jesus for his readers, including us. In other words, this is much more than a story. It’s a story with profound application to life – then and now.

Jesus was on trial accused of insurrection against the Roman government. His accusers, limited by Roman occupation, brought Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate, by all accounts in and outside the bible was a petty, mean, cynical, and contemptuous man. For ten years he held absolute power over the Jewish people and their nation. He ruled in the name and power of Caesar.

Like all Roman civil servants, Pilate was at his desk before dawn. In the midst of his paperwork, he heard a disturbance outside and was informed that some Jewish leaders had a prisoner they wished him to try. They would not come into the Praetorium where Pilate lived and worked since it was near Passover, and they did not want to risk becoming ritually unclean.

Did you hear the irony? Religious scruples can easily mix with murderous intent!

Pilate went outside to hear the complaint. The rest of the narrative alternates between scenes inside the Praetorium and outside before Jesus' accusers.

Pilate asked for the charge against the prisoner. The reply was a sarcastic, "He's a criminal. We wouldn't be here if he weren't!"

Pilate's reply is equally sarcastic, "Then you try him. He's your prisoner."

"No, you try him" [more sarcasm]. "You Romans have the power of capital punishment – you took it from us."

Pilate retreated inside to his judgment hall in the Praetorium where Jesus was waiting. "Are you really a king?" Pilate asked.

Jesus answered by taking over the interrogation. "Did you hear that from others or is that your opinion?" he asked Pilate.

Sarcastically, Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? How do I know how you people think? Why did your own people charge you with insurrection?"

Jesus changed the course of the conversation with his reply – and this is the heart of the issue John wants us to see. "My kingdom is not from this world," he said. Note that Jesus does not say his kingdom is not *in* this world, some otherworldly spiritual expedience. He insists that the origin of his kingdom is not *from* this world. He represents the kingdom of God, the rule of God on earth.

"Well, then, you are a king!" Pilate responded.

"You said it," Jesus said. I have come to tell the truth, God's truth, to this world.

Pilate, cynical Roman public servant, replied, "What is truth?"

Our reading ends with Pilate's interesting question, but the narrative continues and so must the sermon.

Pilate returned outside where he tried again to convince Jesus' accusers to spare his life. He offered them a convicted insurrectionist, Barabbas, in exchange for Jesus but the crowd refused.

Pilate went back inside, dressed Jesus in a purple robe (the color of royalty), and a crown of thorns. Then he had Jesus flogged. The soldiers, representatives of the greatest human power on earth, Rome, mocked Jesus – the pretender king.

Pilate took Jesus outside, robed and crowned, beaten and bloody, and presented him to the crowd. "Behold the man," he said. Jesus, humiliated and broken, stood silent before his accusers. It was an object lesson on power: real power contrasted with powerlessness.

One last time, Pilate tried to spare Jesus. Back inside the Praetorium, Pilate bluntly reminded Jesus of an obvious truth, "Don't you understand that I have the power of life and death here?"

"No, you don't," Jesus replied. "Your power, like all human power, is derived from a higher source. All power, including yours, comes from God."

Finally, all hope of acquittal defeated by political expediency, Pilate went outside one last time. He presented Jesus, still robed, crowned and bloody. "Behold your king!" Pilate announced.

We know the rest of the story. It ends on a cross which the New Testament authors dare to proclaim is, in fact, the power of God. And then Easter day – Jesus' life becomes the power of God to save us and the world. And here we are!

You may not know the other “rest of the story.” Pontius Pilate fell out of favor with Caesar and ended his days alone in exile, stripped of power and prestige.

Our story, like the rest of the biblical story, is the triumph of humility, service, and suffering. It is the power of the spiritual in contrast to the temporal. It is the story of real life versus all false claims.

This story provokes Christian reflection on the uses and abuses of power in our world and in us.

The world and our lives are filled with multiple powers – political power, economic power, corporate power, personal power, sexual power, religious power, the power of public opinion – and on and on.

All these powers have potential for great good when used responsibly. Success is in large measure the ability to understand the proper use of power to get ahead and/or do good. Most of the good and great achievements in our world are the consequence of power used for good. The best experiences of our lives are also the result of power used well.

But as we all know, success is also understanding the limits of power. Power is inherently corruptible, and if not restrained, becomes destructive. Most, if not all, ethical choices are matters concerning the use or abuse of power. The difference between sin and righteousness is usually a matter of the use or restraint of power.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian and American prophet, once said that the human capacity for good makes democracy possible, and that the human capacity for evil makes democracy necessary.

Abraham Lincoln put it more succinctly, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

We’ve all seen and experienced the use and abuse of power. Some say that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. A recent Stanford and UC Berkeley study affirms that popular opinion. Power, the study says, has an intoxicating effect similar to alcohol. We can become “drunk with power.” Power has a psychological component that includes an adrenaline rush. Power makes people oblivious to the responses of people around them. It lowers inhibitions, promotes risky behavior, creates selfish indulgence and isolation. Powerful people tend toward an inability to accurately read their environment or hear the truth. The end result is often bizarre, even stupid behavior.

Into this world of corrupt and corrupting power comes another power, a power from God. It stands alongside ordinary human powers in radical contrast. It unmask human powers for what they really are.

More importantly, the power of the Kingdom of God creates an alternative way of life and an alternative community. This new, creative power reflects the heart of God and contains the content of God’s character.

This new, creative power was revealed in Jesus Christ. By all accounts, his mission was simply to serve God and God’s cause on earth no matter what the cost. Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve and give his life for the world – for us.

He never bullied or manipulated others. He consistently pointed away from himself toward God. Possessing enormous power, he lived and served with great restraint. He taught that his men and women would be “gentle people.” The Greek word “gentle” is a word that describes a horse under the control of rein and bridle. From the beginning, he directed all his ambition toward God’s work on earth precisely in the lives of people who entrusted their lives to him.

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In the process, he formed a new community of people who live in this old world of power and ambition. The women, men and children of the new community know and trust a new power and follow a new ambition. We are called to join God in the healing of God's broken world – and that includes healing one another. In a world of destructive ambition and corrupt power, an alternative world is growing. It's called the Kingdom of God, and it is entrusted to you and me.

Against all evidence to the contrary, we believe that God's power, the forces of our souls, will prevail. Contrary to popular opinion, we believe this new way of life is actually real life.

And wonder of wonders, this new and creative power of God came into the world in the strangest way. Next week we enter the season of Advent, a season that celebrates God's salvation. The mystery and the wonder of it begins in the story of a dirt poor couple in a nowhere village – and a baby. Such is the power of God. Behold, your King!

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