

November 21, 2021 – Christ the King

Is Christ the King?

Jesus himself won't even answer that question as it is posed to him.

So much for simple questions having simple answers.

Though it's more of a short question than a simple one, really.

It's complicated on so many levels. It's complicated by pondering it in the context of living in a nation founded on the removal of a king from authority and replacing him with something altogether different. Not just another king with a different name and a different face.

It's complicated by nearly a century of history since Pope Pius the 11th instituted the Feast Sunday of Christ the King. He did so in 1925 as a response to rapidly trending

nationalism and secularism. Mussolini was consolidating power across town in Rome, the Soviets were firmly in control in Russia and Hitler had just been released from prison after his first coup attempt and his book *Mein Kampf* had hit the store shelves. A dedicated annual liturgical reminder to Catholics -- adopted by fellow Christians -- failed to convince the overwhelming masses of worshippers of the importance and integrity in where their ultimate loyalty lied. The consequences of this could be counted in terms of the deaths of tens of millions, many of the perpetrators and the victims alike who were Christians.

It's complicated by living in a time when those lessons from relatively recent history are all too easily forgotten. When lust for the power of a strong nation headed by a strong leader serves as an idol to which millions again flock. When nationalist identities co-opt Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical Christianity in various Western nations for the

sake of declaring who belongs and who does not. When fallible human problems are widely viewed as subject to nothing more imaginative nor transcendent than fallible human solutions.

We witness this dialogue between the representative of Rome's emperor and Jesus as the accused usurper to that throne through a lens clouded by all that complication.

Are you the King? Pilate asks.

For Jesus, his asking the question, framing it in those terms is telling. It's a political consideration undergirded by religious concerns and there are others not present, whose interests hang in the balance. Emperors. High priests.

Uneasy alliances.

It's always been complicated.

It's always been problematic when government and religion tangle in ways that corrupt one another.

So while Pilate is occupied with keeping the upper hand, Jesus is not entangling himself in the mess of what is. He is speaking instead to what is becoming ... and what is yet to be realized.

They speak different languages. And I don't mean that in a literal sense. Whether they converse in Greek or translators are in the picture, Pilate is fluent in political calculation. The "king" before him will adopt those terms but Jesus operates from a different framework in defining words and concepts like "world," "kingdom" and "followers."

We do ourselves a favor when we let go of some preconceived notions about what Jesus means. A kingdom not of this world is not about a future Heaven, far off at the end of one's life or at the end of all time. It's about life abundant and made available to us already begun. It exists on this planet but it runs counter to the world human sin and

brokenness has fashioned. It has no interest in power over but is imbued with empowerment.

And it does not empower with weapons for combat. The kingdom that is Christ's equips with instruments of peace like love and forgiveness. Useless for conventional war, the language of power that empires have long spoken. But essential for living in a realm headed by God and dedicated to turning the world as it's always been upside down. Love does not defeat enemies. It prays for and acts in their best interest. Forgiveness avoids and diminishes conflict. It restores relationships. It doesn't tilt power balances in favor of one side or another.

In Pilate's understanding, and in that of tyrants for centuries, it's entirely foolish. Laughable. Weak. Inconsequential and hopeless. Jesus as king is a joke and the punchline is driven home in the form of mockery, from

the sign affixed to his crucifix to the crown of thorns and royal robe he is made to wear.

You say that I am a king, Jesus testifies to Pilate. This is most certainly true that he does. And the actions of the earthly authorities over him speak more loudly than their words.

But we part from this passage with Jesus' appeal to truth and his very embodiment of it. His invocation of his followers as caught up in the allure of that promise and all the possibility it holds and all that it leads us into.

I don't know that it leaves us convinced that king is the best description of Jesus and his relation to us as his people, the ones he loves enough to show us how to truly love. I asked us at the outset here to consider our biases in approaching this theme. They certainly have their influence and lead us to examine the evidence and find ample reason

to believe there's plenty to show "king" is not a title for which Jesus was and is striving.

But if it's thrust upon him, he will take it up. And take it to death with him. And when arising anew, he will redefine it so it can't be stuck to him in the same way. And he will subvert everything about its traditional meaning.

But whether it serves our spiritual growth to think of Jesus as a king or not, we are blessed and given to live in the kingdom, realm, reign, whatever we might call it that he is establishing. We are forgiven for not being its most upstanding citizens and for unnecessarily complicating what ought to be a lot more simple. We are loved even as we take too long to figure out how we are supposed to love. And we listen to the voice of truth not to give us a final answer but a an everlasting one, with a Word that fits the moments where it is needed to sustain our lives and life itself. Amen.