

Power Through Weakness

I Corinthians 1:26—2:5 John 18:33-40

Traditional/lectionary text for Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday.
Context: It's the Jewish Passover; Good Friday; and Jesus is on trial:

John 18:33-40

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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." ³⁸Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

This is the word of the Lord!

Welcome to the last Sunday of the Christian year - a day traditionally referred to as the feast of "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ" Sunday.

I appreciate that there are probably not many here who manage their schedule according to the ecclesiastical calendar, yet I'm sure we are all familiar with the way in which different countries and cultures celebrate the New Year at

a different times. Culturally *we* celebrate New Year on January 1st, whereas the Chinese New Year, for example, is celebrated at a completely different time (usually in winter), and the *church* New Year is celebrated next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, which means that this Sunday is the last Sunday of the old ecclesiastical year - a day when, traditionally, we celebrate the kingship, or reign, of Christ.

Now, I say “traditionally,” but it’s actually only a tradition that goes back to 1925, which in church calendar years is not very long ago, when the feast day was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX.

1925 was an interesting time for our world. We had only just emerged from “the war to end all wars,” and the signs were everywhere that it was hurtling towards another. We were in the grip of a worldwide economic depression, and desperately looking for answers.

And of course there were some outspoken leaders who believed that they had answers to those questions. One was the Italian leader, Mussolini, who had just celebrated his third year in office. Another was a young rabble-rouser by the name of Adolf Hitler, who had been out of jail for one year by that time, and whose Nazi party was rapidly growing in popularity across Germany.

The world was watching, waiting for answers, and listening to these powerful men who were competing for the limelight, and so the Pope felt that it was time to remind Christian people everywhere that our allegiance is to Jesus Christ our leader, and not to any of these worldly rulers or “kings.”

And so we have *Christ the King Sunday*, or the feast of the Reign of *Christ*. And of course the world has changed significantly since 1925 when this feast was first proclaimed, and many things have changed just in *recent* years. However, as we probably recognize, even with all the change, a surprising number of things seem to have remained the same. Including the hunger for power and control by would-be rulers.

And so, we are presented with this Gospel reading - an excerpt from the dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate which is meant to tell us something about the way Christ interfaces with the power-players of this world.

"Are you a king?" Pilate asks of Jesus. "I'm not that sort of king", says Jesus. "I came to bear witness to the truth." "Ha!" says Pilate. "What is truth?" That's the heart of the dialogue, and it reflects the vast gulf that lay between Jesus and Pilate.

Pilate had an agenda, and you don't need to have a degree in Ancient Near Eastern history to work out what Pilate's agenda was. Pilate's agenda (and indeed

his whole life) was about getting hold of, and maintaining power. And btw, we can add king Herod to that that power mongering too; Herod was the politically appointed “King of the Jews”—that was his actual title. So when Pilate asks Jesus “Are you king of the Jews?” that’s a setup—he’s trying to pit Jesus as a competitor to Herod. Actually, what Pilate is doing is repeating what Jesus’ accusers were saying, so *they* are actually the ones setting him up. We’re going to begin hearing about Herod during Advent and Christmas, and how much Herod was threatened by Jesus at his birth.

So Pilate asks Jesus “Are you a threat?” Because he’s been told by the religious authorities that Jesus is a player, a competitor, a political power-monger in his own right. “I’m not that sort of king” says Jesus. My Kingdom has to do with truth, and its power, and not your kind of power, he says. And Pilate immediately loses interest. He is out the door, saying to Jesus’ accusers, “I’ve finished with your king. You can have him back.” But they don’t want Jesus; they want a prisoner named Barabbas. Who John says was a bandit, but the other gospel writers identify him an *insurrectionist* (that’s a familiar word to us now, isn’t it?). He committed murder during an insurrection, the gospel writers tell us.

The important thing to realize with this dialogue, I would suggest, is that Jesus and Pilate really had nothing to say to each other. They're talking past each other.

Christians have often made the false assumption that the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate was somehow very meaningful and that Pilate must have at least come out of it with a lot to think about. Indeed, there were stories circulating at one point in Christian history that Pilate and his wife became secret converts after this conversation, quietly won over by the words of truth that Jesus spoke to them.

This is almost certainly not true, because we know of Pilate's track record following this event. Their belief simply expresses the wishes of earnest people who like to think that Jesus won over a powerful man in Roman authority.

Most likely is that Pilate learned absolutely nothing from Jesus that day as Jesus had absolutely nothing to offer Pilate that was of any value to him.

Now, admittedly, we do see Pilate making an effort to release Jesus, and it may be tempting to assume that this was because Pilate was somehow touched by Jesus' innocence, but when you look at Pilate's broader history of dirty deeds and mass violence, it would have been out of character for him to have tried to free Jesus out of any righteous concern for justice.

Far more likely is that any attempt Pilate made to free Jesus was more a by-product of either his sincere dislike of the Jewish leaders, such that he would have loved to have annoyed them by leaving Jesus as a thorn in their side, or, that it was because of some superstitious fear that he held, such that harming *Jesus* might have caused *him* harm - a belief that could well have been based on a dream that we are told Pilate's wife had.

We see clearly in the dialogue that Pilate asks very little of Jesus because Pilate has nothing to gain from him, and conversely Jesus has little to say to Pilate because Pilate has nothing to offer him—Jesus clearly sees that Pilate is not interested in the kingdom of God, and “the truth” as Jesus puts it.

Pilate assumed that Jesus would be very eager to dialogue with him, as most prisoners would who want their freedom. But he learns that Jesus doesn't want to play long; that he has no interest in power games. A few verses later in John's gospel (following this reading) Pilate says to him, "Do you not realize that I have the power to kill you and the power to set you free?" (John 19:10). But Jesus tells him that he doesn't have as much power as he thinks he has: "You have no power except that which is given you from above," Jesus replies.

And so, we might raise the question in this scenario: Who really has the power here? Pilate thinks he has supreme executive power - the power of life and death - but it is Jesus who is really in control of his own destiny.

The more important insight here though, for our purposes today, is that the sort of power that Pilate had was of no interest to Jesus. He wasn't interested in competing with Pilate for power at that level. He just didn't play that game. Not during his three years of teaching and healing and exhibiting the Kingdom of heaven to whoever had ears to hear and eyes to see. And certainly not now.

And this is why there can be no meaningful dialogue between the two, because they are playing different games. Pilate is playing a power game. Jesus is playing a different game, so to speak (it's not a game, but you get the idea). Jesus cares about a different kind of Kingdom and a different plan for bringing that kingdom to bear on earth as it is in heaven.

I was reminded, when thinking about this passage, of an old episode of a British comedy show where they re-enacted the Roman invasion of Britain. The only problem for the Brits though, in the funny re-telling of the tale, was that when they heard that the Romans were coming to take them on, they assume that it was for a game of soccer. And so, as Caesar watches the Britons line up on the field of battle, he asks, "What army is this that fights with a ball at their feet?"

while the Brits quickly blow the whistle and yell “foul,” reminding Caesar that he’s only allowed to have eleven players on the field at any one time, whereas they had counted several thousand invading troops!

You can’t have a meaningful engagement unless you’re playing the same game, and speaking the same language! Pilate’s game is power. Jesus’ game, if you will, is servanthood and suffering.

Many Christians all too readily forget this as they try to engage with the world. Many believe that acknowledging Jesus as king means believing that Jesus wants to play the power game, just like other world leaders do—which leads to believing that Jesus wants *them* to play that game so that God’s kingdom can come—through power. But it’s pretty clear from the Biblical witness that Jesus is not interested in that game at all, and he really does not want his followers playing that game either. Jesus’ kingship, and his kingdom, are not accomplished through power—at least not *the worldly kind of power* that is exercised. We have another kind of power that God has given us to use, which Jesus speaks of and offers at Pentecost.

So, skipping ahead a couple liturgical seasons for a moment, it’s important here to be reminded of a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples. After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples are gathered and awaiting instructions. We read

of one appearance Jesus made to the gathered disciples in Acts 1 where a fascinating conversation takes place about power. In Acts 1 it says, *“When they met together, they asked Jesus, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’* That’s their first question to him. After three years with Jesus, and having witnessed his healing and hospitality and teaching, and especially his death and resurrection, they ask him a political question. The question *“Now are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* is the same as asking *“Now are you going to overthrow the Romans with might and take us back to the glory days of king David, when we ruled the world?”* That’s what they’re asking. *“Now that you’ve got that crucifixion, dying and rising thing out of your system, **now** are you going to restore us to being that great nation when David was king, 1,000 years ago?”*

When David was king it was a time when Israel was at the peak of its national and religious life, and influence and world prominence. Political boundaries were expanded, enemies were subdued, their military was large and powerful, the temple was being built in Jerusalem, and there was great material prosperity. So their question to Jesus was: now are you going to restore us to that era? They want Jesus to be powerful, like David was. And for Jesus to do this it would’ve meant enlisting an army.

And Jesus' reply to their question is brilliant: you want power? I'll give you power: when the Holy Spirit comes, you will be empowered to be witnesses; which means you will be empowered to love and to serve, and (paradoxically) empowered to endure trials and suffering. Because king Jesus suffered, and he knew that his followers were going to suffer for their faith. Paradoxically, *that's* power.

And the irony of the disciples' question of Jesus taking power in the likeness of David before him, is that *David didn't even see himself that way!* In Psalm 146 David says this: "*Do not put your trust in human rulers, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth... who is faithful forever.*" This is king David writing! King of Israel. He's saying, "Don't put your trust and hope in me, or in human rulers like me. We're going to die and someone else will come along and change things. Put your hope, your trust, in God, who never changes. Who *does* call us to exercise our personal inspired (in-Spirited) power to do *justly*, love *mercy*, and walk *humbly* with God as the prophet Micah so beautifully and succinctly puts it. Justice, mercy/love, and humility. That's power!

So the question for us this morning is: Where is our ultimate hope? In whom do we ultimately trust? When we pray, “thy *kingdom* come...” what do we believe we are praying for? What do we think God’s kingdom is? These questions are before us as we consider this encounter between Jesus and Pilate: two different expectations of what it means to be king, and two very different ideas and expectations of what a kingdom is.

Jesus our king chose a path of humility, and death. The path of descent. Which, in the apostle Paul’s words, sounds weak, and foolish. It doesn’t sound like winning...

However, this is really great news for us, and for the world, because it means that we who are subjects of this king Jesus, are not being conscripted into power-playing or war-like service. Rather, it means that we are loved into a transformed life, and set into a kingdom where the last are first, the least are the greatest, where life emerges from death, and resurrection is our hope. Where power is made perfect through weakness; a kingdom that was described by Jesus using images like mustard seeds and yeast. A kingdom where we serve and love in grateful response, trusting that the King of kings will make all things right, in his time.

Jesus was not elevated to king status in order for us to dress him in regal robes and place him far above humanity. Jesus our king came to us, *in lowly humanity*, born in weakness and into poverty, which we begin to acknowledge and celebrate next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent (the Sunday of Hope, by the way, which ties this morning to next week wonderfully).

Our coming and reigning king is a king who will judge with righteousness, and all people with equity, where the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Lead on, O King Eternal. Sounds like a battle song, which it is, in a sense, but for a different kind of battle. Notice the words... “Not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums; with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.”