

Christ the King, November 21, 2021
“The Triumphant King”

Today is an important day in the life of the church. It is Christ the King Sunday, the culmination of our church year and a day we’ve been moving toward since last Advent. Throughout the year, we have explored the mysteries of Christ and the salvation of our God. Let’s think, for a moment, where we have been.

During the season of Advent, we looked with anticipation for Christ’s coming. At Christmas, we celebrated God among us in the flesh. During Epiphany, we saw that Jesus was truly God in the many ways God was revealed through him. During Lent, we recalled his suffering and journeyed with him to his cross. Through the Easter season, we celebrated his glorious resurrection and his ascension into heaven. And for 25 Sundays after Pentecost, we have celebrated the coming of the promised Holy Spirit and focused on the mission of the church. Through all these Sundays and seasons we witnessed the power and purpose of God: that through Jesus God will save his people and give them eternal life. Today, we explore Christ’s kingship over all things and what that kingship means.

The gospel text from John finds Jesus standing before the Roman governor, Pilate. But let’s recall the events leading up to this scene. Jesus has been arrested in the garden and subjected to a mock trial. He has been mocked and ridiculed, beaten with a staff, and struck repeatedly in the face by his accusers. The Jewish leaders have done everything they can, within the limits of the law, to hurt him. Ultimately, they want him dead and out of the way, but they don’t have the authority to order an execution. Only the Romans can do that.

So they drag Jesus to Pilate and ask for the death sentence. To make their argument more powerful, they say that Jesus claims to be the King of the Jews. They know the Romans don’t not want anyone trying to usurp their power, so any threat to the Roman Empire – especially from someone claiming to be a king – will be dealt with quickly and severely. Of course, Jesus has never actually said he was a king. On one occasion, after he performed a miracle, the people tried to make him king; and he was given a king’s welcome as he entered the city of Jerusalem, but he never claimed his kingship.

So, Jesus, bound and seemingly powerless, stands before Pilate – the symbol of a powerful empire – who holds the scales of life and death in his hands. Pilate seems to know right away that Jesus is no threat. No way such a pitiful looking man could be a king. But I think he is intrigued by Jesus and the trumped-up charges against him. He decides to have a little chat with him. *Are you the king of the Jews?* Pilate asks. Jesus does not answer the question directly, but says, *My kingdom is not of this world.*

So you are a king? Pilate asks. *For this I was born, says Jesus, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.* The implication is that Jesus’ rule is something outside the understanding of anyone who does not accept him as the Messiah. And that, of course, pertains to Pilate. Jesus is saying that his kingdom can be experienced *only* by those who accept the truth to which he testifies. Only they can be a part of this kingdom.

I'm sure Pilate is confused. Perhaps we are somewhat confused, as well. So how do we understand this otherworldly kingdom to which Jesus refers? For some help, let's turn to our other readings for today.

The readings from the Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament book of Revelation are both examples of apocalyptic literature; and both help us discern the otherworldliness of Jesus' rule. The exotic character of these and other apocalyptic texts seems to carry us out of space and time, but what it really does is invite us into a deeper dimension of reality. With lots of symbolic language, apocalyptic literature often speaks of future events – namely the end of the world as we know it. However, its intent is not to foretell the future. Its purpose is to provide encouragement and strength to God's people in times of great stress.

Daniel was addressing people undergoing severe persecution. God's people had had their religion and their place of worship ripped away from them. Living in exile, they felt abandoned and terribly afraid. But Daniel uses this vision to remind them of the power of God to save. In his vision, Daniel describes a white-haired Ancient One sitting on his throne – the ultimate judge. We recognize this as God. Then as the court of heaven convenes, one like a human being (other translations say “one like the son of a man”) is presented before him. To this Son of Man is given dominion, and glory, and kingship that will never pass away or be destroyed. This, of course, refers to Christ – the One God will send to save his people. This vision Daniel shares with the people says, *Do not fear; your persecution will not last. God will intercede; help is on the way.* And how many times in the gospels does Jesus refer to himself as the Son of Man? He made this reference many times because he saw himself as the Savior of the world. So, we see him as one who holds dominion.

Persecution was widespread in the first century as well. Even John, the disciple to whom this vision in Revelation was revealed, wrote this apocalyptic book while in exile. Although Revelation contains descriptions of frightful disasters, God's people are rewarded. Their salvation comes through the blood of the Lamb who was slain, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the Almighty through whom all things were created, and to whom all things will return. Again, this refers to Jesus who was led to the cross like a lamb being led to slaughter; the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; the One who is given glory and dominion forever and ever.

Apocalyptic literature often seems dismal and confusing, but it always shows the victory of God. Good always triumphs over evil. Its message is always one of hope. These two texts remind us of the authentic rule of Christ. Christ certainly did overcome the powers of evil and chaos. He did it – not through force of arms or oppression – but by emptying himself of all divine privilege and enduring bitter suffering and death. He is indeed enthroned over all, but he won this distinction – not through the conquest of another – but through the shedding of his blood.

It is this rule of which he speaks when he tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. Here, Jesus is dismissing the conventional notion of kingship – which is akin to tyranny – and giving his reign a new meaning. Jesus rules his kingdom through service to others rather than domination of them. His authority is rooted in truth, not in physical force. He makes no one subservient to himself, but becomes the servant to all. In his kingdom, Jesus' throne is the cross.

There gold is replaced by wood, jewels by thorns, fine wine by vinegar, and rich clothes by nakedness. He is jeered and mocked and humiliated; yet, this is what Jesus understands by being a king. This is what he comes into the world to accomplish. The cross is where he reigns, washing away our sins with his blood.

The sign of Christ's kingdom, then, is the cross – signifying the suffering love of God's own heart. And the goal of his kingdom is the resurrection and transformation of all things by the power of God's love. To see strength and meaning in the cross is to understand the truth of Christ's kingdom. Those things which signify vulnerability, suffering, and death are also the means of attaining glory, healing, and life.

We know that there is and always be suffering and persecution in the world. Even so, we can be assured that through the cross of Christ that we have been vindicated. That cruel instrument of torture has become the symbol of hope and life for those who are part of Christ's kingdom. And as part of that kingdom, having been vindicated, redeemed, and promised salvation through the amazing grace of God, we are called to do more than sit on our hands.

One point I want to make before closing is this: When Jesus says his kingdom is not *of* this world, that does not mean his kingdom is not *in* the world. I teach my confirmation classes that God's kingdom is the power of God at work in the lives of godly people. We can be *in* the world without being *of* the world. We can be God's people without aligning ourselves with the ways of the world. And we do this by sharing the good news of God's love through our words and deeds, by following Christ's example of serving, and by caring for others so that the KOG is advanced in the world.

The liturgical year is a journey through the mysteries of salvation. And here at the end of the journey – which we mark today – we find the victorious Christ enthroned in glory. We believe that he has indeed conquered the forces of sin and death and, that on the cross, the battle has already been won. We believe that Christ is truly triumphant and that he is already enthroned with God. And we look forward to his final glorious appearing.

But even as we give thanks for the victory that has already been won and give thanks that we are a people bound by Christian hope, we still have a job to do. Called by Christ in our baptism, it is now up to us – his hands and feet in the world – to make his reign present. So together we pray: your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.