

Reign of Christ B  
John 18:33-37  
November 21, 2021

*“A Bold Vision”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ Pilate 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?’ Jesus 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.’ Pilate 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.’*

When I think of a king, the first thing that comes to mind is Jonathan Groff, dressed in the regal red robes and grey wig of King George the III on the set of musical Hamilton. I enjoyed the musical, but I loved Groff’s performance. The three times he comes on stage to sing “You’ll be back” are the highlights of the whole thing for me. In a fictional love letter to the colonies, he croons:

*You'll be back, soon you'll see  
You'll remember you belong to me  
You'll be back, time will tell  
You'll remember that I served you well*

*Oceans rise, empires fall  
We have seen each other through it all  
And when push comes to shove  
I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love*

Apparently, one has truly never known love until one has known the love of a king!

If I were to guess, this is also the kind of image Pontius Pilate had in mind when he thought of a king: someone with a certain largesse, command, power, and control; someone who would be more than happy to tell you he was a king even if a royal page had just announced him to you as such. Perhaps that's why he's so incredulous when questioning Jesus about the charges he was brought up on. "Are you the King of the Jews . . . Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus was no king. Pilate knew that. And yet, a claim of kingship by Jesus, or any other, would be a challenge to the one Pilate knew to be the rightful ruler, Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Such a challenge could not stand.

Today, on this final Sunday of the liturgical year, we consider the kingship or the reign of Jesus. If I'm honest, words like kingship and reign associated with Jesus feel awkward coming out of my mouth. After all, we're talking about Jesus: the man who walked miles over dusty ground in sandals, who stood shoulder to shoulder with sweaty dirty crowds teaching and ministering to their sick, who wrapped a towel around his waste and washed his disciples' feet, who openly socialized with undesirables and shunned the powerful and privileged, who openly challenged ruling elites and imperial priorities. Jesus was nothing like a king and when push comes to shove, he would never send a fully armed battalion to remind them of his love. And yet, on this final Sunday of the

liturgical year, before beginning Advent next Sunday, we consider the kingship, the reign of Jesus.

“My kingdom,” Jesus finally responded to Pilate, “is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me safe.” But they weren’t—they didn’t. Because that’s not the kind of kingdom that Jesus longed to build. For Pilate, for Caesar, for Rome, for George III, and for rulers throughout history and nations today, “kingdoms” are built on peace established through violent means, through victory, but not for Jesus.

Jesus was pointing Pilate to a new reality—a new kingdom being born in the midst of the old one: a kingdom not built on the backs of the poor and marginalized, not stained with the blood of the battle-fallen, not teetering dangerously on the edge of abject tyranny or imbalanced by wealth or political clout. Jesus was pointing Pilate to a realm of peace that is the opposite of Roman Peace—of Pax Romana. And it is a realm that Jesus spent his life cultivating, a truth that he tirelessly bore witness to, a hope that he would rather die to bring to life than live and never see come to be. This is the realm of God, the kingdom of Christ, the vision that Jesus bore witness to, worked to build, and died to save—a realm of dignity and equality for all, heaven on earth.

This is not how the “kingdoms” of *our* world are built—not how they operate, is it? They operate on violence. They are established by violence, they interact with one another through violent means, and they respond to violence with yet more violence.

Champion of the American Civil Rights movement, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote:

*The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral,*

*begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.<sup>1</sup>*

Dear friends, that is the essence of Jesus' message to Pilate, to Rome, to his followers, and to us today. The most powerful weapon we have against the forces of violence, intolerance, bigotry, and all else that threatens human flourishing—the most powerful weapon we have is love.

Jesus' dream of a realm of dignity and equality for all, built not through violence, but through love, respect, and mutuality—that dream is not dead—not as long as Jesus' followers still dare to dream it and work together to make it so. It's a bold vision, but I believe that when passionate people unite behind a common goal for the common good, truly nothing is impossible.

The Buddhist monk, author, and activist Thich Nhat Hanh once said this:

*The kingdom of God is available to you in the here and the now. But the question is whether you are available to the kingdom. Our practice is to make ourselves ready for the kingdom so that it can manifest in the here and the now. You don't need to die in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, you have to be truly alive in order to do so.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. "The Keys to the Kingdom of God," Mindfulnessbell.org. December 31, 2005, <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/2015/04/dharma-talk-the-keys-to-the-kingdom-of-god-2> .

May *we* be available to the kingdom. May *we* be truly alive. In all our interactions with others, may we meet intolerance with acceptance, bigotry with big-mindedness, hatred with love, and violence with peace. May Jesus' vision, his witness, and his work be ours too in the days ahead. And may the reign of Christ, the realm of heaven—of dignity and equality for all, built by love—begin anew this day in us, in New England Church, for the sake of our world. Amen.