

Reign of Christ B
John 18:33-37
November 24, 2024

“Kingdom versus Empire”
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 Jewish, 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. 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.’

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There once lived a cruel king who enjoyed executing whoever he pleased. One day, his advisor gave him wrong advice, so the king ordered the advisor be thrown to the ravenous and vicious guard dogs. The advisor said, “I have served you loyally for 10 years and you do *this*?” The king was without mercy. The advisor fell on his knees and pleaded, “Please give me 10 days before you throw me to the dogs.” The king thought about it, weighed his curiosity vs. his blood lust, and finally agreed. The advisor went to the keeper of the dogs and told him he wanted to feed the dogs for the next 10 days. The guard was baffled, but he agreed. So, the advisor started feeding the dogs, caring for them, washing them, and providing all sorts of comforts for them. When the 10 days were up, the

king ordered that the advisor be thrown to the dogs as sentenced. As he was thrown in, everyone was amazed at what they saw. The ferocious dogs were wagging their tails, playing with the condemned man and even licking his feet. The king was baffled at what he saw, “What happened to my vicious dogs?!” he growled. The advisor turned to him and said, “I served the dogs for only 10 days, and they didn't forget my service. I served you for 10 years and you forgot all of it at my first mistake!” The king then realized his own great mistake. So, the next day, he replaced the dogs with crocodiles.¹

Americans have a complicated relationship with monarchy. On the one hand, we can't ever seem to get enough of the glamor, power, and intrigue of royal families. On the other hand, since 1776, the vast majority of Americans haven't wanted one of their own. Stories like the one I shared a few moments ago – of maniacal monarchs drunk on power delighting in the deaths of their subordinates – feel too real, too possible. We admire royalty from a distance the way one might observe a pride of lions – with admiration and fear. As we conclude another liturgical year today with Christ the King Sunday, or its more politically correct twin, Reign of Christ Sunday, we might feel slightly uncomfortable. I know I do.

There's no question that Jesus has been, and continues to be, many things for many people: a babe in a manger, a carpenter, a rabbi, a miracle-worker, healer, liberator, friend, shepherd, mother hen, brother, God, guru, and guide. But also, a king. For many of us, though, this last one just doesn't sit quite right. It's hard to imagine Jesus in a crown. He was, after all, born in a stable; apprenticed at his father's work bench; an itinerant preacher; a man of humble means who preached the importance of serving others and being last, blessed the poor and the meek, touched sinners and outcasts, and died like a criminal. The only crown many of us can imagine him wearing is the one his tormentors twisted from thorns. And yet, it's an image that we have to square with, at least for today. Christ the King.

¹ “There Was a Cruel King Who Enjoyed...” Youtube.com, November 11, 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1B4_J3llls.

As if to add insult to injury, the shapers of the lectionary have prescribed for today a reading from John's gospel that is inarguably political. If there's one thing that's even more uncomfortable than imagining our Jesus as another royal, it's the thought of politics in church. But here we are. It's undeniable that "The earliest Christian confession that 'Jesus is Lord' was inherently seditious, as was the prayer 'thy kingdom come.'"² Judah had a lord, a king, and his name was Herod – a vassal of the great Roman Caesar. Any threat to Herod's kingship was a threat to Rome and a threat to Caesar himself. Even so, with the very first of his recorded words in the earliest of the gospels, Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom of God – an alternative reality to life on earth, "here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not."³

For the first four centuries of its existence, the Jesus Movement subversively worked against the powers of Caesar and empire, often at great personal risk to its adherents. Until suddenly, Caesar and empire brought the trappings of power and privilege to the movement as its champion, with the legalization of Christianity as a religion and the adoption of the faith by Emperor Constantine. Within a few centuries, the Jesus movement evolved into the church which looked increasingly like the very empire it initially sought to subvert. Jesus' notion of the kingdom of God was coopted by the powerful and employed exclusively to describe what believers might hope for in the next life while, here and now, they were subject to the whims of emperors, kings, and institutions.

It's against this backdrop that the architects of American democracy framed the First Amendment to the Constitution, protecting against the co-optation of faith by the state to serve its purposes. And that, I think, is why we bristle at the thought of Jesus wearing a crown – a symbol of empire and co-optation and oppression. And it's why we are rightly suspicious of people and politics that seem to do the same. The kingdom

² Dan Clendenin. "King Jesus," JourneywithJesus.net, November 17, 2024:
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>.

³ Ibid.

of God, as Jesus preached it, looks like “peace making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy and not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than hubris, and inclusion rather than exclusion.”⁴ Anything else is just empire in a new disguise.

I’m not sure that I’ll ever really be comfortable with the image of Jesus in a crown. But I am grateful for the alternative vision of kingdom that he brought to light; of an alternative to the prevailing vision of empire; of a realm of peace making, liberation, sacrifice, mercy, care for the vulnerable, generosity, humility and inclusion. I pray that this vision remains at the forefront of our own minds and that we, like Jesus, will “strive first for the kingdom of God.”⁵

May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matthew 6:33