



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Christ the King Sunday (11/25/2018)

Sermon Title: "So you are a king?"

Gospel Text: John 18:33-37

Pontius Pilate was a man of power and authority. His formal title was "Prefect of the Roman province of Judaea." He was accountable to the Roman Emperor himself, Tiberius. Pilate confidently moved within the halls of power and might. He knew what a king *looked* and *sounded* like. He knew how a king *acted* and *carried* himself. Yet something in Pilate's gut told him that this Jesus was more than appearances suggested - more than a carpenter from a backwater town at the edge of the Empire. And so Pilate asked Jesus one more time: "So you are a king?"

And again, Jesus refused to give a direct answer. Instead, Jesus rebounded the question right back to Pilate, responding "You say that I am a king." That scene from nearly 2,000 years ago repeats itself today, here in worship. On Christ the King Sunday, we look into the eyes of Jesus, just like Pilate did, and we too say, "So you are a king?" And Jesus likewise refuses to give us a direct answer. "Well, Grace Lutheran, you say that I am a king."

Indeed it seems we do. There's a crown on this pulpit, a crown on our altar, and even a crown atop the cross. Even this day has a special name – *Christ the King Sunday* – the very last day of the Church Year. Yes, the Church clearly proclaims that Jesus Christ is a king.

And yet I'm not quite sure that Jesus would agree with his Church on this point. I'm not so sure I do either. That's probably a typically American response. We've never been all that fond of kings. We fought a war to be freed of a king. The very founding of our nation was predicated on the idea that we are all created equal. And though there have been many times over the last two centuries when we have not lived up to the lofty sentiments of that noble notion, I think we all agree that we will never submit to a king. It's just not something that makes sense to us.

And so it probably won't surprise you to learn that this festival – Christ the King Sunday – was conceived in Europe, a region well-acquainted with kings and queens and royalty. It all happened in the aftermath of the grim horror of World War One, which we talked about two weeks ago. The world was disillusioned. Instead of placing their faith in God, people instead invested their hope and trust in emperors and dictators who they believed would keep them safe and strong. And so in response to an increasingly faithless and secular society, in 1925 Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical that established this day. In doing so, he wanted to emphasize three things: (1) the nations of the world cannot be allowed to hold the Church captive; (2) no earthly ruler stands above Jesus; and (3) all must remember that Jesus reigns in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.¹

I don't think anyone can object to those three goals. In many ways, the problems the Pope was trying to address in 1925 remain problems today, which is probably the reason so many Protestant churches, including Lutherans, quickly incorporated this day into the church calendar. But I'm still not convinced that portraying Jesus as a king is the most effective means of addressing these problems. Ask yourself: what comes to mind when you think of a king? We picture someone in opulent clothing, with all the trappings of enormous wealth and power. We picture a king who's set apart *from* the people, who views himself as *above* the people, and who demands our unconditional obedience. If we have even the tiniest feelings of goodwill toward royalty, it has probably come through all the recent royal weddings. We gawk at the spectacle on our TV's. We refer to them by their first names as if they're close friends: Charles and Diana... William and Kate... Harry and Megan. And yet amidst the lavishness and elegance there remains a distance, because we're not included. We're not invited. So is royalty and kingship *really* a helpful, hopeful, and faithful portrayal of who and what Jesus is?

Look, I'll be the first to admit that there've been a few times in my life when I needed a Jesus who was cast in the image of a king. This banner captures some of the names we might call a Jesus like that: King of Kings... Messiah, which means "anointed one"... and Mighty God. These powerful and even intimidating images of Jesus are the ones I've needed to experience when I've gotten far off course after becoming preoccupied with the things of the *world*, preoccupied with *myself*, and preoccupied by just about everything *other than* Jesus. Thanks be to God, those are the times when a King-like Jesus has grabbed me by the shoulders, spun me around, and shouted "THAT'S ENOUGH!" before pushing me back *on course* and *keeping me* there with the loving prod of a spiritual two-by-four upside the head. Have you experienced that Jesus a time or two in your life?

But far, far more often in my life, I've needed a very different Jesus than that, one who bears no resemblance to the kings of this world. I've needed a Jesus who exemplifies some of the other names on that banner, like "Emmanuel," a title that means "God with us." This is the Jesus who sits alongside us in the dark of night when our worries plague us and sleep evades us. This is the Jesus who gives us courage to keep pressing forward, even when we are tired and want to give up, and the Jesus who stands by us when everyone else has walked away.

What about Everlasting Father? That too is a title on our banner for Jesus. We all know that earthly fathers aren't perfect, and so maybe that title causes discomfort for some. I understand, but Jesus is no flawed earthly father; he's a model of the kind of father we should aspire to be and the father everyone needs and deserves. Jesus the Everlasting Father dries our tears when we're sad, and encourages us when we falter. And like the father in the famous parable, this Jesus races across the fields of time and eternity to embrace us and forgive us as we retreat from the wreckage of our mistakes and make our way back home.

Instead of a King, maybe you, like me, have needed a Jesus who is the Prince of Peace. True peace – Jesus peace – is more than the absence of conflict. It's a "calm and joyful heart" even in the midst of turmoil. It's a boldness that fills your heart with courage so you can persevere in loving God and your neighbor. And it's a sense of assurance, tranquility, and stillness that despite the chaos of life, things will be OK. Peace is one of Jesus's greatest gifts.

What would it be like to experience Jesus as the Light of the World? That's the Jesus who brings clarity, commitment, and goodness into lives that are too often marked by confusion, infidelity, and sin. The Light of the World silently dispels the darkness, and illuminates our lives with the same meek and humble power we encounter in a newborn baby's gentle smile.

Our banner offers one final title and image for Jesus – Good Shepherd. A book of sermons could be preached about Jesus in this role. Suffice it to say that a good shepherd compassionately tends those in his care in a different manner than I think most kings would. Our Good Shepherd protects us, guides us, and even sacrifices his life for ours.

So which Jesus do *you* need at this very moment? You don't have to pick. Jesus can be all those things and more. He will come to you *however* you need him, exactly *when* you need him. So let go of all the other things you've enthroned in your life. Walk away from those false gods you've crowned and bow before. Your real Lord, Jesus, is calling to you. Answer him with your heart. Amen.

Cites:

¹ *Quas Primas*, para. 31-33.