

Today, we celebrate the last Sunday of the Christian year. Officially, the calendar of the Episcopal Church calls this “The Last Sunday after Pentecost”, yet many Episcopalians would call it ***Christ the King Sunday***.

It makes sense. After all, we prayed in our Collect this morning of Christ as *King of Kings*, and our Scripture lessons highlighted Christ’s sovereignty.

Yet, you would not have heard of this particular feast day being celebrated even 100 years ago. For Christians in general, and us as Anglican Christians specifically, every Sunday is a Feast of our Lord Jesus Christ where we acclaim, particularly in the Nicene Creed, that Christ’s kingdom will have no end. So why then a special feast of Christ the King? Where did it come from?

This particular feast was inaugurated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, as a reaction to the rise of secularism and dictatorships throughout the world.

It was hoped that by establishing a feast day of such solemnity, people would reaffirm the sovereignty of Christ as King Eternal, so that Christ alone would reign in our hearts and minds, our wills and our bodies.

It seems to me, however, that the language and idea Kings and Queens over us may seem antiquated to our American ears. The notion of Kingship is a thing belonging to the past—and to shows on Netflix.

Apart from the fact that, as someone has written, ‘Christ the King’ has a much better ring to it than ‘Christ our Democratically Elected Leader’, it is hard for us as Americans to fathom what kingship and monarchy actually looks like, let alone what that means applied to God.

It strikes me that we are all comfortable enough Calling Christ the King; my question is what does to mean to be a king then?

I would imagine for most of us, we think of the British monarchy as the closest thing to any idea what kingship looks like, and even then, I would further imagine what catches our eye is all the pageantry.

We did have a terrific display of pageantry earlier this year, when our collective Episcopal bosom heaved with pride at the massively hyped royal wedding where our very own presiding bishop preached.

But Is that all that monarchy means to us today—pageantry to be consumed and enjoyed? I sure hope not. When we say *Christ is King* are we saying that he puts on a *great and dignified performance*? Am I then, as a priest of my Lord Jesus Christ, nothing more than a performer dressed up in a fine

costume, and enacting some performance for you, a gathered audience, to watch and enjoy from a distance? —(PAUSE)— Kingship is much more than pageantry and our love of consumerism.

So, the question is still on the table then: what does kingship mean?

Fortunately, our Gospel lesson today is centered around the nature of Jesus's kingship.

Pilate has just returned from asking Jesus's accusers about the charge of sedition against him.

We know from historical record that Pilate was a brutal man, and that the assignment to the Roman Empire's boondocks of Palestine was not part of his ambitious political career plan. He had tried to send away the pesky Jews but they persisted. So he comes to investigate whether this nobody to him, Jesus, is a political threat to Rome. This is where our lesson picks up.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Rather than answer Pilate directly, Jesus becomes the interrogator and judge in this trial. Pilate is not as in control as he pretends to be and I think Jesus knows it.

“What have you done?” It is unheard of that the accused would have to name the charges against himself in any court, since the captors should be the ones to name the crime. That Pilate asks this question shows that the chief priests could name no crime against him. And more importantly, it shows that Jesus is Lord over the events of His death. Even the governor has to come to Him in order for the trial to proceed.

His own reaction to the question as to whether he was a king, is, at least to Pilate, maddeningly elusive. ‘Are you, or are you not, a king?’ demands Pilate. The answer won't have reassured him. “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, then I'd have a whole crowd of people fighting for me, but it isn't. My kingly role is to bear witness to the truth.”

Jesus responds, in his own way, to Pilate's king question. But Jesus does not brag about being a king; rather, he immediately speaks not about himself but about his community. And here we see what Christ the King means, especially as contrasted against Pilate and earthly kingship.

- *Pilate uses power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Pilate hoards power, and lords it over people even to the point of destroying them, on a cross or otherwise.*
- *Jesus empowers others and uses his authority to wash the feet of those he leads. He spends his life on them, every last ounce of it; he gives his life to bring life.*
- *Pilate's rule brings terror, even in the midst of calm;*
- *Jesus's rule brings peace, even in the midst of terror.*
- *Pilate's followers imitate him by using violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nations.*
- *Jesus's followers imitate him by using self-sacrifice to invite and unify people, as Jesus does.*

- *Pilate's authority originates from the will of Caesar and is always tenuous.*
- *Jesus's authority originates from doing the will of God, and is eternal.*

Jesus places all of this choice conversation material before Pilate, but Pilate hears only Jesus' possible threat to Pilate's own authority: "So you ARE a king?" Jesus again pushes deeper to the heart of the matter: this is the trial of the ages. Truth itself is on trial and Jesus is the star witness.

Will Pilate side with Truth or Cynicism? What about us?

In the end, Pilate attempts to crucify the Truth. He places a placard nearby announcing Jesus as 'The King of the Jews'. The irony is thick, of course, because Pilate has unwittingly announced the truth. There on the cross the King is crowned, not with diamonds or a laurel wreath but with thorns.

The truth is that Christ is King, and that we are his followers, his subjects.

We are the subjects of the King "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

It is up to each of us then, always, but especially as we approach the season of Advent, to work out how, or indeed, whether we will respond to Christ the King as subjects of his holy reign.