

## A Different Kind of King

By: Meagan McLaughlin

November 22, 2020. As we continue to rethink and reimagine everything we're doing these days, maybe it's time to reimagine what it means to say that Jesus is our king, and what Jesus' kingdom looks like. On this Christ the King Sunday, we intentionally leave the palaces, and the crowns, and the money, and the power behind us, and we see Christ the servant.

Readings: [Ephesians 1:15-23](#), [Matthew 25:31-46](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

So, a new kind of king. We've already talked a little bit about this. What do you think of when you hear that this is Christ the King Sunday? What is your idea of royalty? Even though the United States hasn't had a king or queen since we declared our independence from England nearly 300 years ago, we've probably all seen a king or queen, or a prince or a princess, at least on TV. Maybe you watched Princess Diana get married to Prince Charles, or shed tears as her funeral procession wound through the streets, carrying William and Henry while they mourned their mother. You might picture a large, beautiful palace, with lots of gold, ornamentation, intricate carving, statues by famous artists commissioned by kings and queens past, bustling with servants who keep everything immaculate and take care of every need of the royal family. Perhaps you see young royals, being instructed in the proper ways to dress, speak, sit, walk, stand — ensuring that they will know how they are supposed to act as royalty. You might imagine the grand hall, with the royal leaders sitting on their thrones, ready to make proclamations and lay down orders that no one would dream of opposing. Power. Glory. Wealth. Unquestioned rule. Perfect royal dress, food, speech, and behavior.

And in our reading from Ephesians today, the description of God lifting Jesus above all people, putting all things under Christ's feet, ensuring that Jesus' name will be known and revered above all others, certainly seems to lean into the idea of Jesus as king, ruler of all, with a power over everything else in all creation that can never be challenged. A king who wields power over creation, and utilizes authority to send those who do not do enough into eternal torment.

And yet, there are some details in the story that reveal a slightly different picture of Christ our king. Today being Christ the King Sunday seems a good day to reflect on what it really means to be a king — and especially, what it means to us today to say Jesus is our king. What is it we are celebrating today?

Many times in the gospels, we hear stories that indicate Jesus is not the kind of Messiah people were expecting. They thought the Messiah would be a great military leader, ready to challenge and overthrow the occupying rulers who oppressed them so badly. They anticipated Jesus being someone so powerful no one would be able to stand against him. He was, they believed, coming to rule and not to serve. Jesus was not what they expected. He was given the title King of the Jews, but when Pilate asked him about this, Jesus said, enigmatically, that his kingdom was not of this world — and he left Pilate to figure out what that meant.

We still, today, are tempted to lift up and even idolize those who have power and strength, and we can easily miss those who are in the margins — those who are weak, hungry, and powerless. Too often, we as Christians see serving others as something that we do because we are told we should, because God has done so for us. And that's certainly true. But we can easily carry this further, and sometimes come

to feel that we need to serve in order to be worthy of God's love and welcome in God's kingdom, even though we Lutherans claim the grace and mercy of our God. And our gospel today can easily be read — or misread — to tell us this. If we feed the hungry, visit those in prison, clothe the naked, we will be judged worthy. And if not, we will be sent to eternal punishment.

And all around us the world too often lifts up and celebrates above all else those who have power here on earth, and we even hear it said that God has given that power. And those who do not have power, those who live on the margins, are denigrated and demonized. We even hear, sometimes, that challenging those who hold power here, leaders who have wealth and the capacity to affect people's lives — for ill or for good — is the same as challenging God.

But maybe, as we continue to rethink and reimagine everything we are doing these days, it's time to reimagine what it means to say that Jesus is our king, and what Jesus' kingdom looks like. Because something tells me that Pilate never quite understood. But Jesus himself gives us a lot of clues in the parables where he tells us, "The kingdom of God is like this . . . ."

Lutheran Pastor and Bishop's Assistant Libby Howe shares that when Pope Pius XI established Christ the King Sunday in 1925, he hoped it would inspire Christians of his time, and us today, to do just that. He saw that, like today, people were getting caught up in the empires of their times, prioritizing and valuing economic and social systems that benefited a small number of people in power, at the expense of so many others. He witnessed, all over the world, wealth that depended on poverty, systems of law that worked in favor of those with money and other resources and disproportionately penalized and incarcerated those without. Pope Pius XI saw a culture that cared far more for those like us than it did the stranger.

On the heels of World War I, Germany and other parts of Europe and the United States were fostering a culture that ultimately allowed all of the "others" — non-Christians (especially Jews), people of color, LGBTQIA people, those who had disabilities, immigrants — to not only be cast out, but to be murdered, while those who were not targeted, those seen as privileged and desirable, ignored, watched, supported the efforts, and sometimes even cheered.

Pope Pius XI established this day in hopes that we as Christians would be reminded that we are called to follow not political leaders, or wealthy decision-makers, or those who put nation and power above all else, but we are called to honor and follow Christ. Where some of the religious leaders of Jesus' time proclaimed "we have no king but Caesar," we are called to turn our hearts to Christ.

Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, and Pilate never quite understood what that meant, and as we watch and listen to what Jesus is telling us, and notice God's creative and redemptive acts through all of our scriptures, we begin to see that the kingdom Jesus is talking about is unlike any earthly kingdom we have ever known. Jesus tells us in last week's parable that the servant who had the courage to challenge and oppose his master and refuse to take advantage of those around him is the hero of the story. The story Jesus shared of the wise and foolish bridesmaids a couple of weeks ago reveals a God who cares far more about us than he cares about oil. And today, Jesus wants his listeners — us — to know that if we are looking for Christ our King, we will find him in the eyes and stomachs and bodies and hearts of those who have nothing.

And we're back to the tripwire of thinking that the way to get God's approval and love is by doing good, that we need to earn our place. Interestingly, the sheep in Jesus' parable don't know that they are serving Jesus. The sheep, apparently, serve their community not because they've been made to, or

because they'll get a reward, but because they are sheep. And we, followers of Christ our king, serve one another, ensure that God's bounty is available for all, value creation and seek justice, not because we are made to, or because we will earn anything, but because we belong to God.

Jesus tells us his kingdom is not of this world — and it isn't. But it is always, and every day, in this world. The kingdom of God is not a place, but is the creative, redeeming, abundant, loving movement of God that leads us closer and closer to who we were meant to be all along. We're entering into Advent, a season of waiting and watching and preparing and seeking Christ in this world, and this feast that we celebrate as we end one year and prepare for the next shows us where to start.

So this Sunday, Christ the King, we intentionally leave the palaces, and the crowns, and the money, and the power behind us. We see Christ the servant, the one who refused to give in to the empires of this world, and we do the same, not because he told us to but because, in the end, we can't help it. Like the bridesmaids, we may fall asleep. Like the first two servants, we may be swayed by the promises of the empire at times. Like the goats, on some days we may be blind to the world around us. But still, we belong to God, and Christ's kingdom is coming. In fact, it's already here! And in a world where there is so much pain, and weariness, and grief, and confusion, that is truly good news.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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