

# For This...

*John 18:33-37*

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33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 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?' 36 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.' 37 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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Lots of questions arise this time of year. What should I get him or her for Christmas? Can I make it to two holiday parties on the same night? If I order it now, will it be delivered before Christmas? But, perhaps the most important question of this particular time of year is this: When is it appropriate to start listening to Christmas music?

This is the cause of much debate around my house. Jodi and Chelsea tune the car radio into Christmas music as they drive past children trick-or-treating. Well, maybe it's not quite that early, but by early November, it's not uncommon to hear the sounds of Kenny G. playing *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* and Mariah Carey belting out, *All I Want For Christmas is You!*

I, on the other hand, don't want to hear Christmas music until after Thanksgiving. First of all, it feels like Thanksgiving is not getting its due if I'm skipping ahead to Christmas. Plus, it seems funny to listen to Christmas music when it's sunny and 65

degrees outside. But most of all, I worry that the music of the season will lose some of its “specialness” if I hear it too often. After all, if you start too soon, by the time December 25 rolls around, Elvis will have forgotten why he was feeling blue about Christmas this year.

Generally speaking, I could make the case that waiting until after Thanksgiving to start the Christmas music meant that I was waiting until the start of Advent. But this year, that’s not the case. If you’ve already started listening to Christmas music, you’ve started too soon. (Just kidding). But because of where Thanksgiving falls on the calendar this year, we still have another week from today until we start Advent. And what that means is that today is just another Sunday in the season of the church year known as ordinary time.

However, there is something extraordinary about this day. On the church calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday. This feast day of Christ the King was created by Pope Pius XI in 1925. In the midst of the Roaring 20s, Pope Pius was concerned with the lack of authority and respect that was begin given to Christ in the midst of the unrest during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So he created this day to reaffirm and refocus faith and respect in the kingship of Jesus. He had three goals:

1. That nations would see that the Church has the right to freedom, and immunity from the state.
2. That leaders and nations would see that they are bound to give respect to Christ.
3. That the faithful would gain strength and courage from the celebration of the feast, as they were reminded that Christ must reign in their hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.<sup>i</sup>

Fortunately, all these goals have been met. Today, there are no separation of church and state issues in our world. Christ-like leadership characterizes our politicians in Washington. And, both we and our neighbors consistently think and act like Jesus is the Lord of our lives...

Well, perhaps we still need the reminder of Christ the King Sunday. Perhaps we need a reminder about what makes Christ our King.

Our scripture this morning doesn't "feel" like the right text for this time year – a time in which we have just stuffed ourselves around the table and turned our attention to shopping and tinsel. This text features Jesus just hours before his crucifixion. Having already been "tried" by the Jewish High Priest, Jesus has now been brought to Pilate. Since Roman law prevented the Jewish leaders from carrying out the death penalty themselves, they were now turning to Pilate for help. And, so Jesus finds himself in Pilate's Jerusalem headquarters.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is practically silent in his "trial" before Pilate. But in the Gospel of John, there is an extensive verbal exchange/interview.<sup>ii</sup> You can almost hear the disdain of Pilate in his first question. Are you the king of the Jews or is this fake news? The fact is, this was really Pilate's only concern – the political ramifications.

Political sedition fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman courts. When Pilate questioned Jesus about his political claims, it pointed to the Roman awareness of the potential threat Jewish messianic hopes posed to their governance.<sup>iii</sup> Are you the king of the Jews?

If you look closely, you will see that John, the Gospel writer, gives us a clue about what is being asked. Throughout his gospel, he generally uses "Israel" for the people of God, but uses "Jews" to designate worldly unbelief in the role of religious leadership.<sup>iv</sup> From John's perspective, the question Pilate asked wasn't whether Jesus

was the king of God’s chosen people – a leader of a religious group. Rather, his question was whether Jesus was the king of a “world” mindset. The fact was Jesus was a king, but not in Pilate’s understanding of the word. And this was something John saved to the end.

In Luke 1, the birth of Jesus signaled that God would “bring down rulers from their thrones” (Luke 1:52). In Mark’s gospel the very first words that Jesus spoke announced “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). But in John’s gospel, it’s almost at the death of Jesus before this fact is revealed.

Then Pilate asked Jesus what he had done. Why have your own people handed you over (betrayed you)? Jesus’ reply was simple: My kingdom is not from this world. This didn’t mean that Jesus was only the king of some separate “spiritual kingdom” – some other location - as though it had nothing to do with life on earth. What it meant was that his kingdom did not originate in this world. Jesus’ world and this world occupied the same space, but the difference was one of attitude and worldview.<sup>v</sup> And to be clear, this was not a *Game of Thrones* – with Jesus vying for the throne, seeking alliances with the powers of the day, or plotting an overthrow of Caesar. Jesus was already on the throne, already reigning. Yet for those for whom this-worldly politics constitute the only reality<sup>vi</sup> – the Jews and the Romans – this wasn’t what they expected. The Jews wanted someone to turn the political realities of the world in their favor, and the Romans wanted to make sure that didn’t happen – that they didn’t lose their grip on power. Jesus was a king, but didn’t fit either of their constraints.

The Kingdom of Jesus might not fit our constraints of what governance looks like today, either. In Malina and Rohrbaugh’s *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, they suggest: “For most readers of the Bible in the United States, the words “king” and “lord” are perhaps the most difficult NT words to appreciate. Most people today simply have no experience of persons embodying these social roles, much less of the

social system that supports such roles.” They go on to give a definition: “The king was the author and guarantor of the prosperity of his people.”<sup>vii</sup> And most of the time, that “peace” was secured through violence – through being the biggest oppressor.

If this had been Jesus’ *modus operandi*, then, as he put it, “My followers would be fighting.” This-world governance rests on violence or the threat of violence. But his kingship was not secured by force. His reign was one, and is one, of love. I think the hymn “Lead on O King Eternal” captures it well:

*For not with swords loud clashing or roll of stirring drums.*

*With deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.*

The people of Israel should have known that their king would not be a king of force, but a king for the people. This is generally how they understood the messiah to function. Messiah kings in Hebrew/Jewish politics were anointed with olive oil. Olive oil was an economic staple. It could be used for light, as fuel for a lamp; as food, and for healing. To be anointed (“christened”) was to be that for the people: light, food, and healing.<sup>viii</sup> And it was for that, Jesus declared, that he was born, that he came into the world. Everyone who belongs to the truth would listen and understand that.

It’s to this statement that Pilate replies, “What is truth.” That’s a big question. But the fact is, Pilate assumed truth was a “what” – that truth has a definite objective content that can be clearly stated. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus is never said to “teach” the truth. His disciples are never said to “have” the truth. Truth was not an object, a body of material that can be possessed. Truth was and is a “who.” It is a matter of personal encounter and relationship, a matter of worship and commitment that is experienced in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who guides Jesus’

disciples into all truth.<sup>ix</sup> As we will hear again in a few weeks, *the word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth* (John 1:14).

Pilate's very question contains its own answer. In asking this question of the one who is the truth (14:6), Pilate unknowingly revealed that he does not belong to the truth, that he does not listen to Jesus' voice. And in spiritual terms, John has drawn, in the figure of Pilate, a picture of us.<sup>x</sup> People with a choice to make regarding who is Lord.

The difference could not be more profound. As SMU professor Jaime Clark-Soles contrasts:

Pilate used power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. He hoarded power and lorded it over people even to the point of destroying them, on a cross or otherwise. His rule brought terror, even in the midst of calm, and he and his followers used violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nations. His authority originated from the will of Caesar and was always tenuous.

On the other hand, Jesus empowered others and used his authority to wash the feet of those he leads. He gave his life to bring life. Jesus's rule brought peace, even in the midst of terror, and he called on his followers to put away the sword in order to invite and unify people.<sup>xi</sup>

Which will you choose? What has proven to be ineffective time-after-time...or will Jesus be your Lord, allowing Christ's word to be done today...in your life...in our world?

As Scot McKnight rightly points out, we Christians sometime lose patience and fuse the kingdom of God with the present transformation of the world.<sup>xii</sup> We think that the kingdom hinges on our vote, on one election, or one law, or one more thing that we do. Now, we are certainly given the task of prayerful labor and faithful presence in the world. And, the kingdom is certainly a root metaphor for our understanding of God. But, perhaps it would also be helpful to remember that Jesus our King is also Jesus our friend.

A few verses after our scripture lesson this morning, the Jewish leaders asserted that if Pilate releases Jesus, he could no longer be a friend of Caesar. Friendship in this context doesn't imply mere companionship. Rather, it is a description of a relationship in which one party clearly owes his standing to the goodwill of another.

On the other hand, in his final instructions, Jesus calls his followers his "friends." This kind of friendship doesn't eliminate royalty; it is shaped by it. And the good news is that we have standing because of the goodwill of another.<sup>xiii</sup>

So what should our response be to this friend? Love. Love is a verb that signifies allegiance to a lord. Jesus told his followers, "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15). Love for a lord is another word for obedience.<sup>xiv</sup> And this means that the command to love God and neighbor is an invitation to participate meaningfully in every sphere of life, loving with everything we have and everything we are. Loving the difficult co-worker down the hall. Loving through service at the Food Bank. Loving through time spent talking about Jesus with your son or daughter.

This is why this text fits so well with where we are on the calendar. It's a scripture that surprisingly reminds us of what will be anticipating as we step into Advent. Because, when our allegiances to earthly powers in the various spheres of our life lead us to deny God's kingship, we need a friend...we need a king. We need light where there is darkness and violence and hate. We need food where there is hunger for a

different way of living. We need healing where there is brokenness and heartache. And the good news is that we have a king – for unto us was born in the City of David a savior – a king – Christ the Lord. Our allegiance to that King calls us to bring light and food and healing where we can, into the corners of our lives. Yet we must be always mindful that no matter the outcome, Christ is still on the throne. Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper puts that into focus for us: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry Mine!”<sup>xv</sup>

The truth is, no earthly king can overcome the darkness of the world. No earthly king can give us the food we really need. No earthly king can save us from heartbreak. But Jesus Christ was born/came for this. To be a king. To witness to the truth. To save us from “this world” and to bring about shalom – peace and human well-being.

And that’s what we will be singing about, and listening to, again this Advent and Christmas season. We will hear it when we sing *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*:

*Now you hear of endless bliss, Jesus Christ was born for this.*

*He has opened heaven’s door, and we are blest forevermore.*

We will hear it in:

- The First Noel – *Born is the King of Israel*
- What Child is This – *This, this is Christ the King*
- Hark the Herald Angels Sing - *Glory to the newborn king*
- Joy to the World – *He rules the world with truth and grace*

And when we sing these songs of the season – whether it’s before or after Thanksgiving - we can sing them with no constraints, because our king, Jesus Christ, was born for this. *Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!*

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<sup>i</sup> Rutherford, Ian. “Why We Celebrate Christ the King Sunday.” <https://www.aquinasandmore.com/blog/christ-the-king-sunday/>

<sup>ii</sup> Boring, M. Eugene and Fred B. Craddock. *The People’s New Testament Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. pgs. 349-350.

<sup>iii</sup> O’Day, Gail R. “The Gospel of John” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 816.

<sup>iv</sup> Boring/Craddock.

<sup>v</sup> Petty, John. “Lectionary Blogging: Christ the King, 2009” in *Progressive Involvement*.

[https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive\\_involvement/2009/11/lectionary-blogging-christ-the-king-john-18-3337.html](https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2009/11/lectionary-blogging-christ-the-king-john-18-3337.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Boring/Craddock.

<sup>vii</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* as quoted in Stoffregen, Brian P., *Exegetical Notes: John 18:33-37, Christ the King Sunday*. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john18x33.htm>

<sup>viii</sup> Kabelitz, Norb E. “Light, Food, and Healing” in *Sabbattheology*, The Crossings Community, 2009. <https://crossings.org/text-study/christ-the-king-sunday-11/>

<sup>ix</sup> Boring/Craddock.

<sup>x</sup> Prior, Andres. “Who[se] are we?” in *One Man’s Web*, 2015. <https://onemansweb.org/who-se-are-we-john-18-33-37.html>

<sup>xi</sup> Clark-Soles, Jaime. “Commentary on John 18:33-37.” November 21, 2012.

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1490](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1490)

<sup>xii</sup> Hood, Jason. “God is King, No Matter What.” in *Christianity Today*, November 7, 2016.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november-web-only/god-isnt-just-our-friend-hes-also-our-king.html>

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Vander Zee, Leonard. “John 18:33-37” at The Center for Excellence in Preaching, November 29, 2018.

[http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-29b/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_gospel](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-29b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)