

Christ the King

II Samuel 23:1-7

John 18:33-38a

We observe Christ the King Sunday today. This is the last sabbath of the liturgical year. Next Sunday, the first day of Advent, it will be appropriate to wish each other a happy New Years! Christ the King is the youngest of all the Christian festivals, having been initiated in 1925 by an edict from Pope Pius XI. According to the Presbyterian Mission Agency, on this day “the church gives thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ, who is Lord of all creation and is coming again in glory to reign.” We Presbyterians came late into the liturgical part of Church World. When I graduated from seminary in 1985 only a few classes even mentioned liturgical matters. Most sanctuaries were plainly decorated. Often they had glorious stained-glass windows but no paraments or banners. The clergy did not wear stoles and often preferred business suits to robes. Robes, in those days, were for choirs.

Now we celebrate more—though by no means all—of the liturgical occasions beloved by our Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Lutheran sisters and brothers. We noted on a previous Christ the King Sunday that this one can be a bit difficult for Americans. We revolted against our king some 245 years ago and the spirit of independence runs deep in our national soul. Just ask anyone in authority trying to enforce mask or vaccine mandates! The great Irish playwright Oscar Wilde once wrote, “Kings are expensive to keep and have the nasty habit of joining in wars to

protect their inbred cousins on other countries' thrones.” Why would we want to celebrate any king? We do because the king in question is Jesus Christ.

A woman who belongs to this church has two adult sons. Whenever either visits her at home he changes the message on her answering machine. He does not change the words, he changes who says them. Those words go along the lines of, “This is (fill in name of son here), her only son, the son she loves the most. She cannot take your call just now, so please leave your name, number and a detailed message. [Beep!]” The opening words of II Samuel 23 read a bit like that. “The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel: The spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.” Whether David himself wrote this (and scholars argue both “yes” and “no” on that one), the arrogant tone is perfectly accurate to the man. David really **was** all that. The oracle calls these his last words, so they come near the end of a long and intimate association with the Lord. David was set apart by the prophet Samuel for a special place in the nation. David was anointed king. David was the leader who extended Israel's territory to its greatest extent in history. David was the other party in a covenant with God.

II Samuel 23:5: “Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure.” The covenant promised David's house, his line of descendants, would rule eternally on God's throne. It promised other things too, but this was the most precious to him. It is the one he

includes in his “last words”. And we believe in Christ that promise has been fulfilled. Remember, Mary the mother of Jesus came “from the house and the lineage of David.” Though just a common girl from a middling town in the backwaters of Galilee, Mary could trace her ancestry in a straight line back to King David. According to Luke, when the angel tells Mary she would have a baby boy by the Holy Spirit, he adds, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Jesus was born to be king.

Our passage from the Gospel of John takes up the story of Jesus' sham trial. Earlier this same evening he has shared his Last Supper with his disciples. He has morphed the meaning of the Seder dinner they share as the feast of the Passover, instituting our sacrament of the Eucharist. He has led them out into the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays while they snooze. He has gotten arrested. He has stood before the Jewish Sanhedrin, who have mocked and tortured him. Yet even as cruel as that experience has been, it does not satisfy the Jewish leaders. They want him dead. But they cannot execute him themselves. As subjects of the Roman Empire, they do not have that authority. As Jews, their own law prohibited it anyway. But they want him dead. So they haul him before Pontius Pilate.

History knows little about the man Pontius Pilate. His last name (in his native tongue Pilati) makes him a part of a well known, politically-connected family from south-central Italy, close to Rome. The Jewish historian Josephus called him a

member of the “middling aristocracy”. His position as governor of a minor province would have served as a source of wealth and power for his family. His job was to keep the peace. Above all else, his Roman masters required that he keep the peace. And now he has a problem. He has a Jew standing before him whom his fellow Jews have accused of disturbing the peace. Pilate does not care, and possibly does not even know, the arcanae of their law. He does not understand their accusation of blasphemy. He knows and cares only that if he does not get this one right in the eyes of his masters he will lose the power and wealth his position offers.

Yet it turns out that Pilate may have another problem. The guy has a conscience. Clearly reluctant to do the easy thing, to condemn the disheveled man standing before him to crucifixion, he questions him. The Jewish Sanhedrin has accused Jesus of claiming to be a king. This would make him a rival to the Roman order among the people and again, the Romans prize order above all else. As they have learned the hard way, administering a vast empire goes much more smoothly when every threat to them is instantly and completely eliminated. So Pilate's first question is, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus “answers” in a provoking manner. “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replies with an insult: “I am not a Jew, am I?” (Translation: “I do not care what those worms in the Sanhedrin think. I am asking you for my own information.”)

Jesus knows this must end in only one way, with him hanging on the cross. Where you and I would desperately grasp at any straw that might somehow,

miraculously spare us, he takes an oblique but inevitable tack: “My kingdom is not of this world.” While strictly true, this formulation also has the “benefit” from Jesus' point of view of moving the conversation forward to where he needs it to go. Sure enough, Pilate takes the bait. “So you are a king, then?” he asks. Still Jesus will not give him a straight answer. “You say that I am,” he says. Pilate has not actually said so. Ignoring this, Jesus says something more. He claims he testifies to the truth. And Pilate responds with an eerily modern question: “What is truth?”

I believe with all my heart that God timed Jesus' appearance in this world before humanity had invented technologies that could track and record virtually every event. I have watched a number of videos produced by a man who, worn out by “porch pirates”, devised a way to make it not worth their while for people to steal packages delivered to his doorstep. His plan involves a dummy package that has a timer hidden inside. Ninety seconds after somebody picks up the “package”, it explodes with a shower of confetti and sprays eau de skunk on whomever is holding it. It also has a micro-camera that transmits the event to his computer. He posts these videos on his YouTube channel. I have watched videos of helmet cams that reveal what it's really like to play football with an accuracy never matched by color commentators trying to convey it. The Rittenhouse trial ended this week with an acquittal largely based on videos taken by numerous cell phones held by people who were there.

My point is this: for us to accept Jesus as king requires an act of faith, not research on Wikipedia and YouTube. There is no video to prove the truth of his

performing miracles. There is no way to “prove” he is the Davidic king who fulfills the Lord's covenant. There is only faith. On this Christ the King Sunday ask yourself whether you truly believe Jesus is King. What is truth? Truth is irrefutable reality. Truth is the wholly righteous and objective record of what has actually happened. Truth is, despite what so many try to claim today, accessible. We can discover it. We can know it. We can live by it. But we must first believe in it.

Truth matters. And the truth is, Jesus is king. Forever. We are his subjects, among other things, yet subjects we are. Like it or not, this means we have to do our best to obey him. So, what does our king decree? That we love our neighbor as ourselves, and that we love him. As the calendar turns toward Christmas, perhaps we might find ways to show generosity to our neighbors. Instead of another drawer full of sweaters or ties or whatever for people who share our last name, might we find ways to give to people who do not? Instead of adding to the decorations of our liturgically correct sanctuary, might we ornament the lives of people living under leaky roofs? Instead of worrying about whether some selfish, sketchy person is stealing our packages, might we work to discover how they got to a place where they thought it was acceptable or even necessary?

If Jesus truly is our king we have to do what he says. He says the things we just reviewed—and more. For our New Years' resolutions, made this week as Christians, maybe we can promise to follow his lead. Maybe we can make sacrifices that, while they pale in comparison to his, nevertheless benefit others, just as he did.