

## CHRIST THE KING, 2018

### John 18.33-38

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Today's Gospel reading is one of the classic scenes in all history. Jesus before Pilate. Christ and Caesar. The kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God. It is a clash of kingdoms, of authority, of power, of rule that has played out in different ways and places ever since that first confrontation in Jerusalem, even unto today.

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It is the trial of Jesus. But that is only the surface appearance. In a deeper sense the world is on trial before God. The question is: will the world recognize who God is, who is the Lord, or persist in falsehood. "Those who are of the truth," concludes Jesus, "listen to My voice."

Pilate asks Jesus if He is a king. Jesus replies with a cryptic answer: "My kingdom is not from this world." Now, what Jesus does not mean by this statement is not that Jesus' kingdom is some spiritual, otherworldly thing. What Jesus means is that His kingdom is not based on the presumptions and principles of the kingdoms of this world. That becomes clear in what Jesus says next in our text: If His was a kingdom, a rule, like all other kingdoms and rulers of this world, His followers would resort to violence to achieve their ends and preserve His power. That is how power in this world operates.

But not Jesus. As John says in the beginning of His Gospel, Jesus came to reveal God's grace and glory. He came to show us God's amazing grace that forgives sinners and opens to them the possibility of a new, hope-filled future. Jesus came to reveal to us the truth of God: who God is, what it means to be a human being, what God's will is for living a fully human life. Jesus came to reveal to us the grace and truth that God is a God of love, not hate; of peace, not violence; of joy rooted in hope, not despair rooted in fate.

Pilate keeps trying to understand Jesus by the categories with which he is familiar: force, power, violence. He does not realize, however, what he is dealing with: a king who is a servant; a king who dies for His followers, instead of expecting them to die for him; a king whose moral authority comes from truth, not force; a king whose power is love,

not violence. It is a kingdom expressed in the Advent hymn we will sing in a few of weeks:

His is no earthly kingdom;  
it comes from heaven above.  
His rule is peace and freedom,  
and justice, truth, and love.

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It was a key moment in time. History ever since the trial of Jesus can be viewed as a clash of kingdoms. Who is really the Lord of history? Who or what is the truth on which you can base your life?

Our way of marking time reflects this recognition of Jesus as the key event of history. We speak of time as being some year "BC" – "before Christ" – or "AD" – "*Anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord..." In recent years, the sages of secularism have tried to change this to "BCE" – "Before the Common Era" – and "CE" – "common era." For Christians, history will always be BC/AD: "Before Christ" or "In the year of our Lord..." He is the one by whom we mark time.

A half-century ago, Will and Ariel wrote a ten-volume history of the world. One volume in that history was titled *Caesar and Christ*. It told the struggle between the Roman Empire and its ways of doing things and what Christianity offered the world in the first centuries after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. What Christianity offered the world was a different, better vision of life than Rome and its gods. It was a vision of peace, of love, of human dignity, of care for the weak and vulnerable, of a God who is not the protector of the high and mighty but a friend of the poor and lowly.

There is a book in my personal library titled, [Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization](#). It describes how, over the centuries, the Christian message and ministry changed the world and gave us the heritage of civilization. Like a time-release capsule of medicine releasing its benefits, the Gospel of Jesus transformed the world in so many ways for the better. The story of how God in Christ died for our sins, to conquer evil and overcome death, has slowly but certainly changed how people view human dignity, cared for the poor, ended slavery, gave us the founding principles of our society, and, in short, transformed civilization,

bringing the light of Christ to the darkness of this world. When the Roman Empire fell, ushering in what is called the “Dark Ages,” it was the ministry of the Church through the Gospel that provided a way out of the darkness.

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Christ the King Sunday is a rather late addition to the Church’s calendar. Pope Pius XI created it some one hundred years ago. He invented the Sunday to counter the rise of secular humanism, communism, and other atheistic ideologies developing in the world. Pope Pius saw these as a turn away from the rule of Christ to life without any sense of accountability or thanksgiving to God. This movement away from God, Pius believed, would not work to better human life, but work against it.

Would that the world would have listened, but it did not. What resulted in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the bloodiest in history. It forces us to ask the question of one writer (George Weigel):

What accounted for the fact that a century bright with expectation and confidence in the human future had by its mid-point produced two world wars, three totalitarian systems, a Cold War that threatened catastrophe on a planetary scale, oceans of blood and mountains of corpses? There were obviously a host of factors at work, but beneath them all [was] a profound truth: “Men have forgotten God.”

When people turn away from God, they turn on each other. So, Pope Pius invented this Sunday as an affirmation of the rule of Christ over every earthly power. Christ the King lifts up an alternative worldview of the nature and destiny of the world. “Lord, show us that your ways give more life than the ways of the world,” says a prayer in our hymnal. Christ the King Sunday is the answer to that prayer.

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In our time has arisen a new challenger to Christ the King. This time it is not a political, military, or economic system. No, this one is inside us. Today’s competitor to Christ the King is the imperial self, the autonomous individual who is accountable to no one except himself or herself.

This is a philosophy proclaimed in so many ways, especially in our advertizing, like an ad I saw in Prague Airport: “It’s my life, my choice.” Or in the army ad, appealing for you to “Be all you can be.” Or former Supreme Court Justice Kennedy in his opinion on a case “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” It’s Sinatra singing, “I gotta be me” or “I did it my way.” This philosophy is promoted in our children’s movies and shows, like Princess Elsa in the movie Frozen saying, “It’s time to see what I can do/To test the limits and break through/No right, no wrong, no rules for me/I’m free.”

In the end, it is an empty philosophy that will fail to deliver the life it promises. It will fail because, as King Jesus said, if you live for yourself you will lose your life. Life is meant to be given away, to be a blessing to others.

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My friend and role-model in ministry, Pr. Cochran (who visited here twice in my time here), tells a story from his days as pastor in South Philadelphia. He found out the king of Sweden was coming to visit Philadelphia. So, he gathered a group of kids in the neighborhood and asked them if they would like to go to the airport to see the king arrive. “Sure,” they answered. (Anything to get out of the neighborhood.) So off they went.

They got to the airport and stood at a big window to watch the king’s plane arrive. The people started getting off the plane. One child, not knowing what to expect, asked, “So, which one is the king? Who is he?”

Which one, or who, is the king? That is the question each of us has to answer for our lives. Who or what will be the source of all good, our refuge in time of need, our ruler, guardian, guide, and stay? Many answers have been tried. But none have lasted. Except one. It is the one of whom the Church sings in a hymn:

*Jesus shall reign wherever the sun  
does its successive journeys run.*

Amen.