

**Christ the King Sunday**  
**John 18:33-37**

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**November 25, 2018**

**Prayer for Illumination:**

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word.  
Silence in us any voice but your own,  
that hearing, we may also obey your will.  
We pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Scripture Reading:** John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ 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?’ 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.’ 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.’

**Sermon:** Living in Christ’s Reign

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday may be one of the least well-known and least understood holy days of the church. You may have noticed some of the signs in worship that it is a special day: My white stole and the white paraments that come out for Easter, Christmas, and Communion. At the top of our bulletin it announces that it is Christ the King Sunday . . . not just a numbered Sunday after Pentecost or in Ordinary Time. But even with those hints at its holiness, we still do not celebrate it with the reverence it deserves. Maybe we just don’t know enough about it!

Christ the King Sunday has been celebrated for less than 100 years. In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted this holy day in the midst of growing secularism. The 1920s were roaring with economic prosperity, an increased interest in celebrities and sports heroes, struggles surrounding prohibition, and those flappers. Culture was rising in prominence and importance, so Pope Pius XI responded by instituting a day, on the last Sunday in October, to recognize and celebrate *Christ’s* importance and dominion over all creation. He asserted that since Christ is given all power in heaven and on earth, all people are subject to his dominion and not one part of us is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, wills, hearts, and bodies and direct how we live.<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XI was intentionally recognizing the power Christ should have over our lives.

Continuing our history lesson, it wasn't until 1969 (44 years later) that the Feast of Christ the King was moved from the end of October to the last Sunday of the Christian year, before the beginning of a new liturgical year on the first Sunday of Advent. This strategic placement of the holy day makes it the culmination of a year's worth of stories of Jesus as Lord and King.

According to Matthew's account, the idea of Jesus as king had been present since his birth. The wise men who arrived came from the East and were asking, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on a donkey, in the manner of a king. Jesus was heralded as King of kings and Lord of lords. There is a thread that runs through Jesus' story. A good friend reminded me that the New Testament was written because of Easter. While Jesus' birth was important, it was only important later, in light of his crucifixion and resurrection. Only *then* did the people go back and remember the things that had taken place years earlier: the things that Mary had pondered in her heart years before became clearer; the stories they had heard through the years had more poignancy and depth. The meaning was interpreted *after* the fact. New life was breathed into history. In 1969, Pope Paul VI chose to place Christ the King Sunday as the climax of the church year to highlight Jesus' leadership and kingship and to emphasize the game-changing dimension of what it means to call Jesus Christ, King. In Jesus's own lifetime and in the generations immediately following, to call Jesus Lord and King was to say that the Roman emperor was *not* Lord and did not have final authority over human lives.<sup>2</sup>

So, Christ the King Sunday IS a thought-out and intentional holy day, just not one that we have observed or celebrated with much care. We put much more thought into Thanksgiving, a holiday with a religious background that has incorporated other emphases such as reflections on gratitude, turkey and apple pie, family gatherings, and football games. Every year Christ the King Sunday falls just as we are cleaning up the Thanksgiving dishes and starting to unpack the Christmas decorations. But, before we start the Advent preparations, with wreaths and calendars, trees and lights, gifts and parties, it really *is* worth pausing to think about the importance and implications for recognizing and celebrating Christ as King.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asked. I don’t know what words Pilate emphasized. “Are YOU the King of the Jews?” questioning whether it was *Jesus* who was the leader and teacher. Or whether Pilate asked, “Are you the KING of the Jews?” with more emphasis on what authority or power Jesus might have had. Pilate certainly had an idea in his mind about what kingship looked like. Kings have power and often wealth, they control others and use force to get their way. Pilate and others in the Roman government may have felt threatened that others were declaring Jesus as king. They may have felt their power was threatened.

Jesus didn’t answer Pilate directly with a “yes” or “no.” Instead, he simply responded, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Jesus was making a distinction between the earthly kingdom that Pilate ruled in, and God’s kingdom. He was not threatening to the Roman government since he was not ruling in the way of secular kings. Jesus’ kingdom, Jesus’ leadership, did not follow the rules of the culture.

- The culture said that kings have power. Jesus ruled not with power, but as a servant. He washed the disciples’ feet, he ate with sinners, he provided an abundance of wine at a wedding feast, he took children on his knee.
- The culture said that kings have wealth. Jesus did not live in wealth, but depended on the generosity of the community. He ate meals with families. He and his disciples borrowed an upper room for their last Passover feast together. He took the bread and fish offered from a young boy and fed a crowd. He did not live in wealth but helped all to share what they had.
- The culture says that kings have the authority to force their subjects into following them. Jesus did not rule by force. He rejected violence and ruled with love. He was ready to suffer instead of inflict suffering; he was willing to be killed rather than to kill. The power and force behind Jesus’ actions was love, because he knew that love can transform the world into the reign of God.

Today, we are not very familiar with kingdoms and kings; but, that pull between culture and Christ is familiar. We can still feel the conflict between the two Kingdoms, one of this world (culture) and one of the divine realm (the way of Christ). “The world still wants us to worship all that is Not-God, and the culture rewards us when we do.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus told us and showed us what a counter-cultural life looked like. As Christians, we are called to live counter-cultural lives. The culture elevates power, wealth, celebrity, family, military might, economic security, and Black Friday deals. Jesus elevated the “supreme values of service, love, self-sacrifice, and faithful community.”<sup>4</sup> Kingdom living, living in the reign of Christ, is holding onto the values of Christ.

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, so soon after the bustle of Thanksgiving, it is appropriate to stop and reflect on Jesus’ birth, ministry and teaching, healing and sharing, sacrifice and resurrection, and to give thanks. It is appropriate to celebrate the end of the church year and all we have learned and experienced about Jesus’ leadership and ministry. And, it is thoroughly appropriate to take time to ponder the allegiances we have. Do we pledge our allegiance to the Kingdom of the world and the pull of popular culture, which heralds consumerism, militarism, and nationalism . . . or do we pledge our allegiance to the Kingdom of Christ, which teaches us the values of service, love, sacrifice and faithful community? On this last Sunday of the year, it is important to look back to the stories of the past year, and forward to how our lives will look because we live under the reign of Christ. Our allegiances should inform how we live. As an Episcopal theologian said, “The message is this: if you love God, if your values are God-values instead of the world's values, if Christ actually is King, then you will love as God loves, give as God gives, forgive as God forgives. If your values are God-values, you can't help but live as Christ taught.”<sup>5</sup> May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Quas primas*, §33, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana* quoted in Wikipedia “Feast of Christ the King,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast\\_of\\_Christ\\_the\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_Christ_the_King)

<sup>2</sup> Garrett, Greg. “If Christ is King, What Does that Mean?” Sermon on November 20, 2011. Posted at <http://day1.org/3357-if-christ-is-king-what-does-that-mean>

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<sup>5</sup> Garrett, Greg. “If Christ is King, What Does that Mean?” Sermon on November 20, 2011. Posted at <http://day1.org/3357-if-christ-is-king-what-does-that-mean>