

Reign of Christ, Year B, 112512
All Saints Episcopal Church

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?"

In the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ, which happens to be the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next week, Advent begins again, and we will enter Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary.

I think it is interesting to know a little bit about how this feast came into being. In 1925, Pope Pius XI, wrote an encyclical instituting this feast day. Pius connected the denial of Christ as king to the rise of secularism around the world, particularly in Europe. The day of this observance, initially, was the last Sunday in October, a week before All Saints' Sunday. However, in 1969, Pope Paul VI moved the date of the feast from October to the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, or the last Sunday after Pentecost - the Sunday before Advent. It seems fitting that the feast celebrating Christ's kingship is observed right before Advent, when we liturgically wait for the promised Messiah (King) - a day on the cusp of where for every ending there is a new beginning and for every beginning there is an ending.

There are some issues for us to face a century after this feast began. First of all is the reality that the originally subversive nature of Christianity gradually became the status quo in the Holy Roman Empire, making it a part of the power structure of the Emperor and changing the face of Christianity ever since. By the time the Protestant Reformation rolled around, it seemed perfectly normal that the countries of Europe were aligned according to the religious faith of their heads of state.

Another issue is that the church has not always behaved as it has been called to do by this king we celebrate today; far too often, the church has participated in the political games that create winners and losers, groups with power and groups without it. So as Christians, we are called to be aware of our own past and reject the church's interest in worldly power.

And, of course, we know that the world is a different place than it was in 1925, and there are hardly any kings around who are anything more than figureheads.

So what does it mean when we say Christ is King, especially when our self-understanding in this country is that we are independent from the idea of monarchy? What is it that we are celebrating?

Well, it's easy to see that more issues are raised by just looking around at the state of our world: if Christ is King, why is there so much violence and unrest in the world? If Christ is King, why are there children dying of malnutrition around the world? If Christ is King, what are we to make of the current crop of world dictators and tyrants? If Christ is King, why are we humans continuing to make choices that endanger and even kill off other species that share with us "this fragile earth, our island home"?

Either Christ is not a king, or he's a king who doesn't care; OR there's a reality that we can't see that is hidden behind the everyday reality of these questions.

"Are you the king of the Jews? Pilate asked Jesus mockingly.

The very idea of the Jews having a king in any meaningful sense must have seemed ridiculous to Pilate. Furthermore, Jesus must have looked anything but regal as he stood before Pilate. He had been arrested in Gethsemane; all his disciples had abandoned him; he had defended himself before a Jewish court; and he had probably been roughed up by the Roman soldiers who had arrested him.

But there was also a serious side to the question. A king of the Jews would have represented a challenge to Pilate's authority and, more importantly, to his bosses in Rome. The Roman Empire still responded to such challenges just as ruthlessly as when the magi came to Herod looking for the infant Jesus and he had all the boys 2 years old and under slaughtered.

In reply to Pilate's question, Jesus denied that he was a king in any way that would make sense to the Roman governor. "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."

The confrontation with Pilate was rich with irony and ambiguity. Pilate appeared to be powerful but was really powerless; Jesus appeared to be powerless but was really powerful. John had already told his readers that part of Jesus' mission was

to 'cast out' the ruler of this world who has no power over Jesus. Paradoxically, Jesus brought down the 'ruler of this world' by submitting to his power; his death brought about the destruction of the powers that nailed him to the cross.

Pilate was not the only one who misunderstood the nature of Jesus' kingship. Even the disciples didn't get it. James and John wanted to sit beside Jesus in his kingdom. To 'sit' was to occupy a position of power, and to sit beside the king was to share in his power. But Jesus told them that they totally misunderstood the nature of his kingship and his kingdom: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

A rabbi whose name I cannot recall has said, "Christian triumphalism makes me uneasy." It makes me uneasy, too, and today is filled with triumphalism. While we are not singing 'Crown him with many crowns' and 'All hail the power of Jesus' name' as we often do, we are singing 'Jesus shall reign where ere the sun doth its successive journeys run' and "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.' Great hymns, but they make me uncomfortable, because it is all too easy to give Jesus the crown but take the power for ourselves.

The early followers of Christendom overcame Rome through martyrdom, but after Constantine's conversion, the victorious Christians started making martyrs of their former adversaries. The history of the church is spattered with blood because power requires violence to maintain itself. In other words, we use the rhetoric of Jesus, but we behave like Herod and Pilate.

The kingdom over which Jesus reigns still defies our understanding. He rules over a kingdom with no borders to defend, no soldiers to defend it, and no weapons for the soldiers to use. It is a kingdom that turns our values upside down. The one who serves is the one who rules.

We still ask the questions that the magi and Pilate asked: "Where is he who is born king of the Jews?" and "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Knowingly or not, Pilate answered his own question. The Gospel of John tells us "Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. It read: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'."

The cross is Jesus' royal throne and also the antidote to Christian triumphalism.

Jesus reigns from the cross, and to share his kingship, we must also share his suffering. There is plenty of room at the right and left hands of Jesus, but those who would share his power must also share his cross.

Like the magi, we are also on a pilgrimage seeking the king. Unlike them, we cannot bring our gifts to a manger in Bethlehem. But we can still find him in those he came to serve. When we find those folks, our call is to behave as citizens of the kingdom: to serve the hungry, the homeless, those who live on the margins, the poor and neglected.

Next week, we begin a new year. Let us resolve ourselves to make this kingdom that which it has been created to be.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.