
“Who’s the one on trial, here?”

A SERMON on John 18:33-37 for Christ the King Sunday, Year B
Preached 21 November 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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I must confess that I have found myself a bit intrigued, to say the least, at how many ads have shown up at my doorstep in the past few days for so-called “Black Friday” sales. After all, Black Friday as a “thing” exists because of how the Thanksgiving holiday is scheduled in the United States. As most of you know, Thanksgiving in the US is on a Thursday—the fourth Thursday in November—and because of this, a significant part of the population either gets or takes the Friday of that week off, too,¹ making for a four-day long weekend. With a free day on their hands and the family Thanksgiving gatherings mostly done with, what better way to spend some time than get a head-start on the Christmas shopping, right?

That “head start,” though, has crept earlier and earlier as the years have gone on. And I don’t just mean the so-called “Christmas creep” of merchandise and decorations showing up before Remembrance Day or even Halloween. I mean the “head start” of Black Friday shopping. Stores kept pushing things back to the point that maybe around 10 to 12 years ago, if I remember right, some of them began opening for their Black Friday sales *on Thursday*. Yes, that’s right, on the Thanksgiving Day holiday itself.

During one of those earlier years when Black Friday started starting on Thanksgiving itself, Adam and I were driving home from a Thanksgiving gathering with part of Adam’s family, listening to the news on the radio as we drove. The reporter was on-location at a store on Thanksgiving evening and was interviewing a woman who was expressing her displeasure that Black Friday now began on Thanksgiving itself. She resented the sales intrusion on the holiday and felt badly for all the workers who were forced to work. The reporter then asked this woman—this woman who evidently was *completely* unaware of the utter irony of her remarks—why she had come out to participate in these Thursday evening sales. “It’s a ritual of sorts,” she replied, “you know, it’s what you do.”

So, there we found her: standing in a retail store on Thanksgiving evening, caught in the middle. On one side was her sense of what was good and healthy, for workers and for society and maybe even for herself, and on the other side were all the pressures of capitalism and a culture of consumerism wherein shopping and buying have taken on ritual (or even ‘religious’) status. And, I *say* she was “caught in the middle,” but of course the fact that she was there in the store to be interviewed that evening, and didn’t even seem to realize the conflict between what she was saying and her own actions—well, that would seem to show which ‘side’ of the tension ultimately had won out.

In our scripture reading this morning, we’ve been dropped in to the middle of the gospel of

¹ Unless, of course, you work in retail, food service, or other similar customer-service-oriented jobs—the often-overlooked “new” working class, those who labour for relative low wages while having neither the perks of white-collar professional jobs nor the protections of labour unions (as usually found among the “old” working class of traditional blue-collar jobs).

John's version of the "passion story," John's account of the events leading from Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and death. In today's snippet of this story, we stand inside the headquarters in Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate, who at the time was the Roman Empire's governor over the region that included much of what we today would call Israel and Palestine. In the passion story, Pilate is the symbol of the Roman Empire and its supposed power and authority. And yet, even though he is supposed to be the one in charge, in John's telling of the passion story, *Pilate* is the one seemingly caught in the middle.

Outside the doors of the headquarters were the religious leaders—the ones referred to as, *quote-unquote*, "the Jews" by this gospel writer, but more precisely the chief priests and scribes and temple authorities. Inside the doors of the headquarters was Jesus. Outside the doors were the accusers. Inside the doors was the accused. Outside the doors were figures of power, frothing at the mouth in fear. Inside the doors was one whose calm and clarity betrayed his true power.

And running back and forth through those doors was Pilate.

Pilate, who in theory should be the one ordering people around, would find himself being pulled back and forth through that doorway no fewer than seven times in this story. The whole scene invites us to ask just who it is that's truly on trial, and just who it is that holds the ultimate power.

For churches like ours that follow the patterns of the Christian year in our worship life, today is known as "Christ the King Sunday." It is the last Sunday in the yearly cycle, and as our journey through another year comes to a close, we pause to proclaim and celebrate Christ's ultimate rule in our lives and in our world. On this day, we also acknowledge that the Christian story has an end to it—we *are* driving towards a destination, which is the Kingdom of God. It is a celebration of what is and an anticipation of what is yet to come.

Of course, speaking about Christ as "king" is not without its problems. History is littered with examples of kings (and queens) who were simply bad: abusive, capricious, lacking in wisdom or skill or love. And likewise, history is also littered with examples of kings (and queens) who *abused* the image of Christ as King to claim for themselves a divine mandate for their own royal prerogatives. And yet, even there's a reason that our Christian confession of Christ as King has stuck with us, even with all the imperfections and difficulties of such language. It comes down to a simple, yet profound question: if Jesus is king, then who is *not*? If Jesus is king, then *what* is not?

That's the question that had Jesus taken into the halls of Pilate. If he had merely been a nuisance or even a religious radical, he would not have warranted any attention from Pilate, the representative of the emperor. He especially would not have warranted crucifixion, even if found guilty. But the fact, the *historical* fact, that he was killed by crucifixion betrays the reality that he was a political threat to the empire itself.²

If Jesus is king, then Caesar is not, you see.

"Jesus' rule and kingdom are profoundly subversive to any worldly authority that demands allegiance over loyalty to God."³ That's why, I believe, confession of Christ as King has

² See Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), especially chapter 2.

³ Robert A. Bryant, exegetical commentary on John 18:33-37, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year B, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 337.

persisted, and in fact remained powerful, even among people trying to resist the unjust rule of some supposed “authority”. Perhaps *especially* so among such communities. Among people who lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ as King meant that Caesar did not, ultimately, have the final say. For enslaved Africans labouring to line the pockets of white American society, the confession of Christ as King meant that the rule of the “master” in the “big house” was only temporary. For Pope Pius the 11th, who first named this day “Christ the King Sunday” and added it to the Roman Catholic calendar in 1925, the confession that Christ is King stood as a counter-example to the failed reigns of Kaisers and czars and as a counter-testimony to the rising voices of folks like Mussolini. For some German Protestants gathered in the Barmen section of the city of Wuppertal in 1934, the confession that Christ is King was a rejection “of the false doctrine [that] there [are] areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ” and the church would have to “abandon” its ways according “to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.”⁴

For any of us on this very day, our own confession of Christ as King—really, our own recognition of the reality that Christ *is* King—it stands as a bold testimony, a protest, if you will, against any power that would try to keep us captive. In the face of violence, we say “no, the *Prince of Peace* is King, not you.” In the face of illness, we say “no, the *Great Physician* is King, not you.” In the face of politicians who bend or even break the truth to serve their own ends, we say “no, the *One who is Truth itself* is King, not you.”

God’s rule is not like the rule of humanity. As Jesus said to Pilate, “my Kingdom is not of this world.” We hear that claim often, but let’s be honest: it can be hard for us to really get it. The other voices are so loud and heard so often that, like the woman standing in the store on Thanksgiving evening simply because “it’s just what you do,” we have a hard time imagining there can be something else.

But that’s where church comes in, my friends. Not that we always get it right, of course, but ideally—at our best and most faithful and most authentic—this is the place where we give witness to an alternative kingship that rests in truth, not trivial headlines; compassion, not consumption; courage, not cunning calculation; generosity, not mere utility; looking beyond ourselves, not simply *at* ourselves.

That’s part of the reason, quite frankly, that I find it so important to make a pledge to my church—and more specifically, a significant pledge that has a meaningful and material impact on my own budget—as a part of my own spiritual practice and participation in Christ’s kingdom. The voices of the world that tell us our human worth is tied up with our net worth and that our enjoyment of life will increase in step with our bank balance, these voices speak loudly. When I make an up-front, first thing off-the-top, set-percentage-of-my-take-home-pay pledge—and then let *that* be a determining factor on the rest of my budget, rather than the other way around—I’m making an intentional choice to live into something *other* than the consumerist and capitalist ways of this world, an intentional choice to invest in something that (at least at its best) is connected with Christ’s kingdom rather than our own kingdoms.

⁴ *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, 1934. The Barmen Declaration subsequently has been included among the subordinate standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the complete text can therefore be found within the *Book of Confessions* of that denomination as chapter 8 (pages 280 – 284 of the 2016 edition).

Each of you will have your own way of responding to the call of Christ in your life. Moreover, each of you will have your own way that you *need* to make a choice to do something contrary to all the voices around you that compete for your allegiance and lure you into following the crowds rather than the King. Can we stand for the truth, as he does? Can we *belong* to the truth, as he does? Can we make intentional, courageous, even sacrificial choices about how we go about our day-to-day lives and use our day-to-day resources in order to live more fully into his reign?

Yes.

Yes, we can. Together with one another and, moreover, together with Christ who embraces us and welcomes us into the only true and everlasting kingdom, we can.

So, my friends, let's get to it.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.