

## ***An Outcast King***

Christ The King Sunday - John 18:33-37

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Jesus reigns as sovereign in love and truth.

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Each year on the Sunday before Advent, the church celebrates “Christ the King Sunday.” Unlike most of the liturgical calendar, Christ the King, or sometimes “Reign of Christ” Sunday is not an ancient celebration. If you find yourself scratching your head trying to come to some recollection of Christ the King Sunday, you’re not alone.

It is more than just an excuse to avoid putting up Christmas lights, though if you need it that may work.

Unlike Pentecost, it is not named in scripture. There are no special candles like Advent, no foreign visitors like Epiphany. As far as I can recall, there was no mention made of it in my classes in seminary. Adding to the confusion, other than getting up early to watch Royal weddings or funerals, most Americans do not spend a great deal of energy thinking about kings and queens.

Christ the King Sunday is a newbie on the calendar – just about a hundred years old for Catholics, and about 60 years for Protestants.

In 192 the Roman Catholic Pope Pius XI became worried about rising tides of secularism and atheism. He was concerned about communism in Russia, Fascism in Spain and Italy, and noticed the early signs of Nazism in Germany. He responded by declaring a feast day known as “Christ the King Sunday,” declaring the hope that while governments rise and fall, Christ shall reign forever. “Jesus Christ is very truth, and it is from him that truth must be obediently received by all,” Pius wrote. Sometime after Vatican II, Christ the King became celebrated ecumenically. That’s great for Catholics, you might say, but notice that even in 1647 our Presbyterian Westminster catechism described the “divine offices of Christ” as “our Redeemer, prophet, priest, and king,” both in his “estate of humiliation and exaltation.”

Jesus is the outcast king.

While Americans tossed the monarchy to the curb 250 years ago, we find ourselves still strangely attracted to fables of their myths and powers. We get up early to watch them

get married, and manage to tear up a bit at their funerals. We follow their sordid affairs more closely than some of us keep track of our own families.

In his memoir of growing up royal, Prince Harry comments about the conflict many of his country feels about the monarchy:

Britain has long had trouble making up its mind. Many support the Crown, but many also feel anxious about the cost. That anxiety is increased by the fact that the cost is unknowable. Depends on who's crunching the numbers. Does the Crown cost taxpayers? Yes. Does it also pay a fortune into government coffers? Also, yes. Does the Crown generate tourism income that benefits all? Of course. Does it also rest upon lands obtained and secured when the system was unjust and wealth was generated by exploited workers and thuggery, annexation and enslaved people? Can anyone deny it?

According to the last study I saw, the monarchy costs the average taxpayer the price of a pint each year. In light of its many good works that seems a pretty sound investment. But no one wants to hear a prince argue for the existence of a monarchy, any more than they want to hear a prince argue against it. I leave cost-benefit analyses to others. My emotions are complicated on this subject, naturally, but my bottom-line position isn't. I'll forever support my Queen, my Commander in Chief, my Granny. Even after she's gone. My problem has never been with the monarchy, nor the concept of monarchy. It's been with the press and the sick relationship that's evolved between it and the Palace. I love my Mother Country, and I love my family, and I always will. I just wish, at the second darkest moment of my life, they'd both been there for me. And I believe they'll look back one day and wish they had too."

We compared John F. Kennedy's presidency to Camelot, and assigned other presidents Shakespearean identities. Nixon has other leaders to Shakespearean kings. For example, Richard Nixon was long been compared to [Shakespeare's Richard II](#), and more recently some of his critics have seen similarities between Donald Trump and King Lear, though its hard imagining Lear chomping down a Big Mac.

And, throughout our history, we've associated political families with royal dynasties—note, for example, that 2024 was the first time since 1980 that neither a Bush, Clinton, or Biden [was on our ballots](#). But our long fascination with royalty only gets in the way in proclaiming Christ as King.

Notice how perplexed Pilate is as he interrogates Jesus. Pilate understands royalty. He held the title “Friend of Caesar,” acknowledging his closeness to the emperor. He enjoyed imperial patronage. When Pilate ruled, he ruled in the name of Caesar – an all-powerful ruler believed to have been divinely consecrated to rule the world.

Early on Friday morning, Pilate walks into his headquarters, demanding to see the one others are calling “The king of the Jews.” Jesus is bruised from being tortured, his hands bound and surrounded by guards. He is a prisoner, and certainly not a king.

Pilate lights a cigarette, and inhales deeply. He squints his eyes at the bruised and beaten prisoner. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus is brought here on charges unsupported by evidence. Yet this is no typical trial. There is no concern for the truth, no worry about facts. His presence before Pilate presumes his guilt, and likely assumes his punishment.

For John, Jesus is the truth. Throughout the entire Gospel, Jesus has been the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, just as he told his followers. He spoke words of truth to the woman at the well, and raised Lazarus as the reminder of God’s truth. He has told his followers that the sheep will hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and they will follow him. Indeed, he is the way, the truth, and the life. Pilate, however, sneers at the truth. He is a bit like the Marine colonel Jack Nicholson played in the movie “A Few Good Men.” Under pressure, Nicholson snaps at the younger officer who is questioning him. “You can’t handle the truth!”

And this is what Pilate believes. The only truths Pilate knows is malleable, twisted to his unjust purposes. Like all representatives of empire, Pilate finds “truth” to be a convenient way of making lies serve his own greedy purposes. Such is the way of those who seek to control, manipulate, or rule over others.

Jesus, however, speaks the words of truth only an outcast king could speak. He tells Pilate that his kingdom does not belong to the world. If it did, his followers would be enraged, storming Pilate’s headquarters, “fighting to keep me from being handed over.”

“My kingdom is not from here,” Jesus told a confused Pilate. By the purplish hues of that Friday’s early morning light, Jesus announces that he is indeed a king. It is, according to John, not the day of Passover, but rather the day of Preparation. John wants us to know that as the lambs were being prepared for slaughter, so Jesus was being handed over.

He is a king, but not a king who will die heroically. He is an outcast king; one executed between two thieves. Here is the truth of God's kingdom: it is a kingdom poured out for those who are outcast.

King Jesus stands vulnerable before Pilate. Peter Marty, the editor of *Christian Century*, reminds us that anyone who has ever had a surgical procedure knows that sort of vulnerability. Wrapped only in that thin surgical garment, Marty says we become aware that the garment is much like our health insurance. Every time we turn around we see something that is not covered. Vulnerability leaves us scared, and anxious.

King Jesus' life was a life of sharing in our vulnerability. It is a vulnerability which exposes God's grace and God's peace. Pilate cannot know that sort of peace, just as he cannot understand that sort of truth. But those who have heard the Good Shepherd's voice do. We hear it, and we understand. We follow because he is the way, the truth, and the life.

And we shape our lives accordingly. What does our king expect of us? Only the truth. "If you continue in my word," Jesus has said, "you are truly my disciples, and you know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

There's a little song some of us learned in youth group or summer camp. "King Jesus is all" we sang, and you should too. "King Jesus is all," (King Jesus is all)/ my all in all/( my all in all)/And I know that he'll answer (and I know that he'll answer)/me when I call/me when I call./Walking by my side (walking by my side), I'm satisfied/I'm satisfied, King Jesus is all, my all in all." *Amen.*