

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

³⁴ *"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"*

³⁵ *"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"*

³⁶ *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

³⁷ *"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.*

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." (John 18:33-37)

Does a King do This?

What does a king do? They rule right? We don't have a king here in the United States, but I looked it up this week and discovered that there are 26 monarchies still in existence in the world today. The one we're probably the most familiar with is actually a queen right now, the Queen of England. While most European kings and queens are really just symbols, in other parts of the world, there are a few kings who rule, like the king of Saudi Arabia. But is that the only thing they do? There is another important function that virtually all kings do: they command the armed forces, at least technically. That's why England has a Royal Navy and Denmark a Royal Army, even though those monarchs don't actually run those forces. In the ancient world, kings did rule and they also fought the people's battles. They had other functions, too. They served as judges. They also served as visible symbols of the state. So today, many kings and queens serve as good will ambassadors. They make appearances at big events in their own countries. They represent their country around the world. They give their citizens a kind of identity.

Does Jesus do any of those things? Certainly, he gives us our identity as Christians. He will judge the world. And he does rule the world. Of course, Jesus also fights our battles. He commands the angel armies of heaven who protect us, but even more, he defeated the devil at the cross and the empty tomb and won eternal life for us. So Jesus most definitely fulfills all the functions of a king. So why do we have this particular gospel lesson before us today? Today is Christ the King Sunday – it's all about recognizing the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Yet is that the image John's gospel gives us this morning? **Does a king do this?**

I.

Do you see Jesus ruling anything in this lesson? Do you see him leading any armies into battle? He clearly states that he is a king, and yet, what is Jesus doing in this reading? He's on trial for his life. **Does a king stand trial?** Not voluntarily. Of course, it has happened, but usually only after a revolt tossed a particular king or queen out of power or an enemy conquered him. That's not what's happening here. Jesus wasn't run out of his palace by a mob. He didn't lose a battle and get captured by the enemy. Instead, his own people arrested him and handed him over to the Romans and asked them to kill him. So the King of kings and Lord of lords was standing, bound and already beaten up after a night of Jewish abuse, before a gentile ruler. Make no mistake about it, Pontius Pilate was no Christian. He didn't believe in Jesus. He wasn't even a Jewish believer. If he believed anything at all, it would've been Roman religion and philosophy. That's who stood in judgment over the Savior that God had promised to send the Jewish nation.

So you can bet that on that morning, Jesus didn't look anything like a king. Pilate even had to ask him, **"Are you the king of the Jews?"** What did he mean by that question? Pilate was not asking if he really was the ruler of a Jewish kingdom. Pilate himself was ruling most of the Jewish kingdom in the name of the Roman Empire. But he was trying to get to the bottom of why the Jewish leaders would want to kill Jesus. Pilate had probably been in Jerusalem for a couple of years at least, and it's interesting to speculate how much he knew about Jesus. For about three years, Jesus was the most famous person in Israel and it seems impossible that Pilate would have known nothing about him. But he probably didn't spend a lot of time hanging around with regular Jewish people. Pilate would've viewed Jesus through a Roman lens. He probably looked down on him the way conquering people often look down on those they conquer and he probably had a fairly limited knowledge of Jewish controversies and religious questions. The specific charge of Jesus being a king came

from the Jewish leaders. They wanted Jesus dead and so they came up with a charge that would make the Romans act. Someone who claimed to be the king of the Jews sooner or later would have to come into conflict with Roman authority, so Pilate had to ask the question.

Jesus answered, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”** So he was a king. In fact, no greater king has ever been born. Jesus is the King of heaven. And Jesus is the King that God had promised to send. Again and again, in the Old Testament, God promised a descendant of King David who would rule over his people and fight their battles and give them peace and prosperity and who also would judge the world. Because the Jewish people didn't understand those prophecies correctly, Jesus' enemies were looking for a king who would fight the Romans and drive them out. They wanted a king of this world.

That is never what Jesus is. Even today, we Christians have to understand this point. Jesus did not come to set up a kingdom in this world. So we will never have a truly Christian government. We can never use threats or violence to spread his kingdom. That has been done in the past, but that's not what God called us to do. We need to avoid the temptation to use politics and elections to further a Christian agenda. All God gave us to extend his kingdom are words, because we follow a king who conquered by dying. We follow the Lord of heaven who set aside his power and glory so that he could walk this earth and be insulted by the people who were supposed to serve him and be put on trial by unbelievers who had no real power over him.

We follow the most unique King who was ever born. No King ever had more glory than Jesus, but he hid it all while he was here. Jesus did that for a reason: so that Pilate would kill him. That's why he came, to die and rise and pay for all the sins of all the world. He came because we sinners don't really want to be a part of his kingdom. Left to ourselves, you and I would spend all our lives satisfying every sinful desire we could. So Jesus came and made himself nothing so that puny, empty, powerless underlings of human kings could question him and torture him and execute him. He did all that for us.

Can you imagine a ruler doing that today? Can you imagine an American president getting out of his bullet-proof limousine to jump into front of a crowd and lay down his body to protect the crowd from terrorists? Can you imagine an American president jumping in front of his Secret Service detail to keep those agents from being hit by an assassin's bullet? In this world, other people jump in front of bullets to protect presidents and kings. But the King of kings and Lord of lords threw himself on the cross in our place to suffer hell itself and die so that we will live. That's what today reminds us of.

II.

Jesus explained that if he were the kind of king Pilate thought he wanted to be, his servants would have fought for him when he was arrested. By this time, Jesus had been in custody overnight. He was arrested the night before in the Garden of Gethsemane and dragged to the residences of the high priests, Annas and then Caiaphas. He was beaten by their guards and tried. False witnesses accused him of all kinds of crimes. Finally, the Jewish ruling council had condemned him and let the guards abuse him some more. Then as early as they could count on getting an interview with Pilate, they had dragged him to the Roman headquarters for this hearing. Of course, it would only go downhill from here, as Pilate had him scourged and beaten to try to get some sympathy from the crowd so that he could let him go. But in the end, Pilate would order him to be crucified. The only time in all this that anyone raised a hand to help Jesus was when Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when Jesus was first arrested. And Jesus himself told him to stop. Even when someone was willing to fight for him, Jesus refused to let that happen. My friends, **does a king stand alone?**

No. But Jesus did. He didn't resist. He didn't go to war. He walked to his death so that he could win life for us. He did that because he was not a king of this world, who only cares about his power and his position. Jesus is the king of heaven. He rules in our hearts even while he rules all things for the good of the church. But Jesus did not deny who he was. In fact, he even reached out to Pilate. Jesus said, **“You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”** He was asking Pilate which side he wanted to be on.

Did you hear what Jesus said his real weapons are? Not soldiers. Not law courts. Not even the contributions of church members or the dedication of lay leaders or the service of pastors. Jesus' only weapon in the battle for our souls is truth. You all know what Pilate thought of that. “What is truth?” But Jesus took truth very seriously, the way that only God, who knows all and sees all can. To Jesus truth is very simple: it's

all that God tells us. More specifically, it's God's message of love and forgiveness. Everyone who is on the side of truth listens to Jesus because to be on truth's side you have to be a believer. You have to cling to the truth of his love and forgiveness.

God has made the truth the most powerful force in our world. Now when I say that, it might sound like I'm saying something political. Many revolutions in this world have been powered by the idea of exposing corruption and bringing the truth to light. But I'm not talking about that kind of truth. That kind of truth isn't always powerful and it doesn't always win. When Jesus spoke of the truth, he meant the good news that our sins are paid for and we are forgiven. God built his power into that truth. That truth can take a heart that is hardened and unrepentant and fill that heart with trust in Jesus and love for his fellow man.

Now, to do that, the gospel truth has to employ the truth of the law. God's wrath over sin has to break down the hardened shell of the unbeliever who thinks that he or she is going to be OK. But that's just a preliminary step. The real change comes from God's love. The God who loved us so much that he sent his one and only Son to be tried and convicted and tortured and killed for us – that God has forgiven all our sins. That God has opened the doors of heaven to us. That God sees you and me as holy and perfect and he promises to bring us home to be with him. There is no more powerful truth on earth than that.

Jesus is the King of that Truth. He has hidden his kingdom behind the gospel message. He has hidden his power in a book that can seem musty and out of touch with our lives. He has hidden his power in words when we think actions would do so much more. He has hidden his power in bread and wine and in water. He has hidden his power in pastors who fumble around up here and struggle to serve him out there. He has hidden his power in teachers who have to spend most of their day teaching math and science and English but who look forward to the moments they get to lead their children to their Savior. Nothing about what we can see in the Church, nothing about the gospel exudes power. But the power of God is here.

One of the greatest examples of power is the authority to pardon. Only a ruler can set aside the judgment of a court and free a condemned prisoner. Jesus has the power to set aside the verdict of God's own court and free us prisoners. He has done that. He did that when we were baptized. He does that every time we hear that we are forgiven. The King sets us free. That's something else kings do. Jesus our King won the battle against sin and death and hell by laying down his life for us. Jesus our King rules all creation for the good of the church, even when all we see is suffering and loss. Jesus our King sets aside the verdict of the law and declares that we are perfect in God's sight. Today is Christ the King Sunday. Does a King do all these things? Our King most certainly does. Amen.