

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As you already heard, today is a Sunday in which we honor and worship Christ the King. For someone new to church, but who knows a little bit about Jesus, the theme of this Sunday might sound a bit strange. Christ... the King?! He's definitely not the kind of king or ruler we usually think of. He had no earthly territory that he reigned over. He had no riches. No robe. No crown. No army. He didn't levy any taxes. Yes, Jesus is a very different sort of King. He is one who is much, much better than any earthly king.

In our reading today, we see Jesus standing before an earthly ruler, the governor, Pontius Pilate, who attempts to determine if Jesus really is a king or not. Perhaps that will be our goal this morning as well. Is Jesus really King? And if so what kind of king is he?

As we finish the church year and head into Advent and Christmas, it might seem strange that we look at this text which might better belong in the season of Lent. This is the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry. He has been betrayed by one of his own, Judas. He was arrested by the Jewish leaders, tried and found worthy of death. And now he is taken to Pilate who is the one who has the authority to actually sentence him to death. Just a couple hours or so from this moment, Jesus will be hanging on a cross. And it is in this setting we discover what kind of King Jesus really is.

In our text, we have two vastly different rulers – Pilate and Jesus. First consider Pilate. He was looking out for himself in this trial. That's pretty typical of kings and others with authority. Usually more important than the needs of the people, is preserving and extending their own power. Pilate needs to come out looking good. You see, Pilate wasn't very well liked. He was the governor of a province the Romans called Judea. He wasn't well liked by the Jews. He killed some men as they worshipped God in the temple. But he wasn't exactly well liked by the Roman government either. Pilate had been in power years earlier and lost it because of his inability to control the people. Years later at great personal expense and with many bribes, he bought his way back into the governor's palace. But he was on a short leash. Any more uprisings or problems, and he's gone. So he's in a tough position.

The Jewish leaders were insisting that Jesus be put to death. What's more, this was in the middle of the biggest Jewish festival – the Passover. The city was absolutely packed with thousands of pilgrims who came to observe this sacred ceremony. An uprising in Jerusalem at this time would absolutely mean an end to Pilate's reign... and maybe even his life. All of this means that Pilate is inclined to sentence Jesus to death.

But most important to him is whether Jesus is a threat to his power or to Roman power. Was Jesus revolting, trying to win autonomy for the Jewish people once again? And so we read:

Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You up to me; what have You done?"

Jesus knew what Pilate was thinking. Jesus knew that Pilate thought Jesus may be the enemy. A rival king. Pilate wasn't the first to mistake Jesus' ambitions and goal. Herod did the same thing back when Jesus was a baby. When the wisemen said a king was born, Herod sent a death squad to Bethlehem to kill all the boys 2 years old and under.

But it wasn't only enemies of Jesus who got it wrong. Jesus' own disciples didn't understand the kind of king Jesus was. Right before Jesus ascended they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to

restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Even at that point they didn't get it!

And Christians since have gotten it wrong as well. The Crusades are one example of Christians getting it wrong about the kingdom of Christ as they attempted to protect and extend the kingdom of God by the sword. But even today there are millions who believe Jesus will give them wealth and health in this world. Isn't that faith in an earthly king with an earthly kingdom? Many Christians believe that Christ will come again and rule 1,000 years here on earth in Jerusalem... again mistaking the kind of King Jesus is.

And haven't we done the same thing? We sometimes look at our worldly problems and think they are our primary concern and need. We look for deliverance from them. A king who can defeat our earthly enemies. Friends, our rival at work is not the real enemy. Unemployment, underemployment and insufficient income are not our enemies. Terrorists are not even the enemy that should cause us real fear. The real enemy is Satan. The real enemy is sin, and the guilt we must carry, and anger of God it brings. Death is the real enemy... which is the result of sin. We do need a king. Not the kind who will establish safe borders, usher in prosperity and provide universal healthcare. But the kind of king that can take care of the real problem: we are rebellious at heart. We are guilty before God. We are on a path leading to eternal destruction. We need a king who can conquer our spiritual enemies and who can grant us eternal life. We have such a king. And he is Jesus.

And so Jesus said to Pilate: **"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."**

And here's where we have to marvel and rejoice. Because God did not send us the kind of king that we thought we needed. He sent the king we really needed.

Unlike Pilate who was looking out for self first and justice a distant second, Jesus did NOT look out for his own self-interest. Jesus very easily could have spoken in his own defense. He could have called witnesses to support his claims. But Jesus thought nothing of self. Jesus was intent on completing the mission given him by his heavenly Father: the salvation of all people. To accomplish that mission, Jesus put aside the glory which was his from eternity as true God. He put off the divine crown that was his and put on the crown of thorns and suffering. He took on human flesh when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary. He was born in a feed box for cattle. He lived in poverty. He served and helped. And then he suffered at the hands of people he created. He silently endured their death sentence. Bore his cross to mount Calvary. Willingly took the spikes through his hands and feet. Was forsaken by his heavenly Father as he bore our sin, shame and guilt.

This man was a king? Yes, a King! One who loved us so much that he went to extreme lengths to defeat our greatest enemies: Satan, sin and death. He proved his victory was complete when he conquered the final enemy, death, by rising from the grave on the third day. His mission was complete. Our King was victorious! Our sin stayed in that grave, buried forever, never to haunt us again. Life is ours, and eternal life will be given when Jesus returns!

Back to Pilate. Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world. Pilate answers, **"So You are a king?"** Jesus answered, **"You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."**

Yes, Jesus is a KING! One that conquers the world? Not in the traditional sense. One who takes up the sword? No! His weapon was different. Truth. Word. As king, he came to bear witness to the truth. To fight for the truth. To make God's truth known. And what truth did Jesus proclaim?

God loves this world. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God and allied themselves with Satan, God didn't give up on them. He didn't abandon world or us. Instead he promised Savior who would restore what was lost. That is the truth.

In the very next verse after our text, Pilate scoffs. “What is truth!?” He’s a skeptic. A doubter. And he’s not alone. Few were on the side of truth. Not Pilate (government). Not the Jews (popular religion). Few today either. And maybe we sometimes doubt. When we see suffering in this world and especially in our lives, are we tempted to ask, “God loves the world? God loves me?!” When we see devout followers of other religions or people with no religion who seem like nice and sincere people we wonder, “Jesus is the only one with the words of eternal life?”

What will get us to believe his truth and remove all doubts? A powerful weapon is needed to smash our doubts, unbelief and skepticism. The Gospel is that powerful weapon. It is the power of God for salvation. It changes us.

Jesus died for us. He rose again. God’s love that goes to all measures and knows no limits. This powerful message creates a new heart in us. It raises us from spiritual death.

So here’s the thing. We follow Christ, who is a strange king. A different king. A king who is not of this world. A king who speaks the truth. A king who conquers spiritual enemies and grants eternal life. To accomplish these things, Jesus suffered in this world and went to the cross for us. We now also live under his cross. And that means we will suffer. He suffered to pay for our sin and guilt and make us right with God. We suffer because we are now associated with him whom Satan and the world hates. So even if we pray that he would take away some pain or suffering or hardship now... and he chooses not to, we still rejoice. He is working it out for our good.

Yes, we follow Jesus, bearing a cross now. But know this: Jesus lives triumphant from the grave. He’s at the right hand of the Father. He is ruling all things right now for the benefit of you and I, his church. And this is his promise: one day we will join him in that Kingdom of Glory. He will raise us from the dead. We will be with him and reign with him forever and ever. We will see Christ our King for the king he truly is. We’ll see it with our own eyes. This is the truth Jesus has taught. Let us listen to our king, believe and rejoice!

Brothers and sisters, Christ is King. He is a king who is not of this world. He reigns with a powerful weapon: his truth. His Word. He has fought and defeated your worst enemies. He protects us. Who rules for our benefit. He will bring us to his everlasting Kingdom. This is Christ our King. A strange King... and just the one we need. Worship him and glorify his holy name today and every day! Amen