

Sermon November 21, 2021

“Powerless Before Pilate: Jesus as King”

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In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus makes three things clear: first, as the king of kings, he – not Pilate – has total control over the situation. Second, his kingdom is up in heaven; it lacks any connection to the world in which we live. Third, because his kingdom lies elsewhere, and because his followers do not resort to violence to protect him, we should likewise remain silent in the face of injustice. Our faith should have no impact on the public square.

You can probably see what I am doing. Everything I just told you was wrong, or at least everything I just told you has been **challenged** by contemporary scholars.

Think about it.

Most of us will accept that Jesus was a different type of king, but how could he be a king without any power? If he was truly **not** in control of the events that transpired after his arrest and “trial” before Pilate, would you still follow him? And what about his kingdom? Where could it be if not “up there” in heaven, and what, if anything, does it have to do with peace and justice on earth?

What kind of king, in short, is Jesus for you and me? What is his kingdom like, and where on earth might we find it? What kind of difference, finally, could it make in our lives?

Christ the King

John’s Gospel identifies Jesus as king right near the beginning. When Nathaniel meets Jesus in the first chapter, he proclaims him the Son of God as well as the *King of Israel*. Jesus accepts the label as evident in his response: “Do you believe [in me] because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” he asks, alluding to the fact that he knew Nathaniel’s whereabouts without physically seeing him.

“You will see greater things than these,” he adds (John 1:49-50).

What might these greater things be? Jesus says that the heavens will be opened. These “greater things” might also include the seven signs Jesus performs to reveal his identity. He will change water to wine and give sight to the blind. Upon the completion of the last signs, we observe the culmination of his power. Lazarus will be raised from the dead.

Not even Pilate could do that!

In the second half of John, however, something strange happens: Jesus washes his disciples' feet, something (gross) a man of royal stature would never do! But then it becomes clear: Jesus is instituting a whole new order of things, a new way of being before one another. "For I have set you an example," he tells them, "that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

In chapter 15, things get even more bizarre. "I do not call you servants any longer," he says to the disciples, "because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my father" (John 15:15). How can this be? How can the King of Israel wash the feet of his followers? How can he call his subjects, his servants, *friends*? What kind of king is this?

Professor Lucy Hogan of Wesley Theological Seminary has an answer: "Jesus is not a king that the world would ever recognize. This is a king who speaks to the lowly and the rejected. This is a king who serves rather than being served. This is a king who enters the holy city, not triumphantly on a horse but seated on a donkey" (John 12:14; see Zechariah 9:9; *Working Preacher*, accessed 11/17/21).

This is a king, in short, who turns our expectations completely upside down, a king whose "power" exists not in his **sovereignty over others but in his service to others**. Imagine if a president, or any other political leader for that matter, exhibited such behavior! It would be absurd. No wonder Pilate cannot make sense of Jesus. Pilate only knows **worldly power** and "winning at all costs." Jesus, on the other hand, responds "from the perspective of the underside of history, which has a very different set of values than that of the dominant society" (Samuel Cruz, *Working Preacher*, accessed 11/17/21).

His kingdom is not from *Pilate's* world – that is, his *social* world, his *economic* world, his *political* world. His *values* come from elsewhere.

Are "World" and "Earth" the Same?

Let's explore the meaning of "world" further by looking briefly at 1st Peter.

1 Peter was written in the second half of the first century to people living in Asia Minor (i.e., present-day Turkey). The author refers to these people as "**aliens and exiles.**" He implores them to avoid attracting the attention of the Roman

authorities by living honorably and by abstaining “from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). Be on guard, he says. “Arm yourself [with the same intention as Christ] . . . so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God” (1 Peter 4:1-2).

Now when we hear “earthly,” most of us probably distinguish it from “heavenly.” God resides in heaven and we live on earth. Heaven is our true home. Peter’s language of “aliens and exiles” accordingly refers to our life on earth, that brief span of time that stretches from infancy to infirmity. We are **strangers in a strange land**. In our pilgrimage on earth, the thinking goes, we should abstain as much as possible from the sins of the flesh until we return to our Father’s house, that is, to heaven (see John 14:2).

In context, 1 Peter probably had a different distinction in mind: “aliens and exiles” had nothing to do with our status as pilgrims on the journey to our heavenly home. Instead, it would have referred to **foreigners or resident aliens** who lived as subjects in the Roman Empire.

We see the same issue in John 18:36.

“Jesus tells Pilate, ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ Many interpreted this [text] to mean that Jesus’ kingdom is somewhere in heaven and not relevant to this world,” explains Samuel Cruz of Union Theological Seminary. “To me,” he continues, “Jesus is saying that the values of his kingdom are different from those of the current system. In other words, Jesus does not have to exercise the type of authority that seeks to be on top, which results in oppression, corruption of the judicial system, and precisely the kind of hypocrisy that Pilate exhibited in the interaction between him and Jesus. Jesus tells him: ‘If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here’” (*ibid.*).

Notice now what Jesus says: my kingdom is not **from** this world. It stems from a different **value-system**, a different way of being, not from a different planet! Jesus kingdom turns our existing social order upside down. It belongs to this world. It flips the script! The “world,” we discover, has a **social meaning** in the Gospel of John. The earth, on the other hand, refers to our physical environment. In John at least, Jesus never contrasts his kingdom to the earth; he contrasts it with the world!

Conclusion

We began today's message by asking three questions: What kind of king is Jesus for you and me? What is his kingdom like, and where on earth might we find it? What kind of difference, finally, could it make in our lives?

We know now that Jesus' idea of kingship was unlike anything we would ever expect. He calls his "subjects" his friends. He washes the feet of his followers. Cruz even suggests he was powerless before Pilate, and that any attempt to suggest otherwise runs the risk of imposing on him the value of worldly power.

Where do you stand?

What kind of king is Jesus to you, and where do you locate his kingdom? Are you willing, as Lucy Hogan wonders, to live in the reign of God following [a] servant king? Do you live a life that reflects your commitment to service? Do you and I reach out to the least and the lost? Do we seek to serve rather than to be served? If you do, then the kingdom of Christ is within you – and among you!

Make a difference in the lives of others, and you will make a difference in the life of your own.

Work, finally, for justice. Yes! Jesus made it clear, however, that violence is not his way, nor is it the way of his kingdom. Otherwise, his followers would have fought to keep him from being captured. This is what makes Jesus the Good Shepherd, he who – unlike Judas the Galilean – led his sheep to abundant life rather than slaughter at the hands of the Empire (see Acts 5:37).

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus makes three things clear: first, as the servant king who has renounced worldly power, he may not have possessed total control over the situation. Second, his kingdom is on earth, and it appears to us when we follow the Way. Third, his refusal to call on his followers to use violence shows us why his kingdom is not from this world. Yet just because we eschew violence does not mean that we should remain silent in the face of injustice.

Let's fight without fists!

Christ the servant king be praised!

Amen.