

We are at one of those places in the year where our liturgical and secular calendars diverge significantly. That divergence is particularly striking this year because Advent begins a week later than usual. Instead of the first Sunday in Advent occurring Thanksgiving weekend, we have another full week of ordinary time ahead of us. Meanwhile, it’s Christmas in the stores and on the commercials on TV; it has been since what, Halloween? And our national frenzy of the holidays with our rituals of overeating, Black Friday, conspicuous consumption, and football, is well underway.

So here we are on the last Sunday of the liturgical year: Christ the King Sunday. It’s a day that encourages us to reflect on Christ’s kingship, Christ’s reign, and, I don’t know about you, but I find it a difficult theme for us to reflect on, because the very idea of kingship is alien or archaic. We have trouble imagining what kingship might mean in our context, even if we sing the hymns with gusto. So the incongruities abound – the very image of kingship in a representative democracy, the out-of-synch calendar. And to top it all off, our lectionary returns us to the story we heard months ago, on Good Friday, the story of Jesus’ passion according to John.

Our gospel allows us to focus for a day on an episode of the story that probably typically gets short shrift. On Good Friday and in the season of Lent, our attention is directed at the overall arc of the story, the inexorable move towards Golgotha and the crucifixion. Often details get ignored by our single-minded focus on the drama of cross and resurrection. So the opportunity to pause and reflect on a particular incident like this may help us look at the story in a slightly different perspective, to see it with new eyes.

Even so, the choice of this particular episode for our reflection on Christ the King Sunday may seem somewhat odd. Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Typical of Jesus, his response is another question: “Do you ask this on your own or did others tell you about me?” It’s a question about Jesus’ identity and as such it calls to mind another question about Jesus’ identity asked in the gospels. In Mark, as Jesus and his disciples walk near Caesarea Philippi, in a region dominated by Roman imperial power and imagery, Jesus asked his disciples “Who do people say that I am?” Then he asked, “But who do *you* say that I am?” These questions were the occasion for Peter’s brash confession, “You are the Christ.”

Now, in a direct confrontation with the agent of imperial power, the question of Jesus' identity is raised again. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus, and we, suspect that Pilate is not asking the question honestly. He does not know, nor does he care, who Jesus is. In fact, he seems most interested in finding some way to avoid responsibility for what is taking place. And Jesus seems willing to help Pilate avoid what is to come. As the gospel of John tells the story, Pilate will make every effort to avoid condemning Jesus to death. He moves back and forth between Jesus and the other players in the drama – the crowd that according to John seeks Jesus' death. He offers to free Jesus, but the crowd will have none of it. Then he stages a mock ritual of coronation with the purple robe and the crown of thorns.

He asks Jesus again about his identity, "Where do you come from?" When Jesus doesn't answer, Pilate tells him that he has power to release him and power to crucify him. Jesus points out that whatever power Pilate has derives not from Rome, but ultimately from God. Finally, Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd and declares, "Here is your King!" Jesus is then crucified under the inscription, *King of the Jews*, and Pilate leaves the inscription on the cross after Jesus' body is removed.

So in the space of a few hours Pilate moves from asking "Are you the King of the Jews?" to declaring to the crowd, "Here is your king!"

Alas, the crowd responded, "Crucify him!" And then, "we have no king but Caesar!" Pilate's declaration, the exchange between Pilate and Jesus, the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the crowd's response, all of it presents us with the imagery and symbolic power of kingship. And as we read and reflect, we are invited to wonder about what Christ's kingship means for us in the twenty-first century. And what is our response when we see the image of Jesus in purple robe and crown of thorns, about to be crushed by Roman imperial power? What is our response when Pilate says to us, "Here is your King?"

The exchange between Pilate and Jesus is about kingship. Jesus responds to Pilate, "my kingdom is not from this world." It's easy for us to side with Jesus, to confess him as King and to realize that his kingship was something quite different than either the Roman or the Jewish leadership understood by the term. We get that. We may not have any trouble proclaiming our allegiance to Jesus' kingship, even if we do not fully understand what that might mean and even as we may not really want to live as if our primary, our only allegiance is to Christ's kingship.

The problem for us is not *proclaiming* Christ's kingship. Rather the problem is *living* as if we believed that Christ is King, that our allegiance to him transcends every other allegiance or commitment or connection. The problem for us is that although we pray the words, "Thy Kingdom come" we don't really mean it.

The problem is that we suffer from the same malady that plagued Pilate. Throughout his dealings with Jesus in this gospel, Pilate reveals himself as deeply cynical. One can't read any of his statements as coming from his heart, being sincere. He is always looking for ways to negotiate through the situation in order to preserve his power and avoid difficult decisions. He mocks Jesus and the crowd when he presents Jesus to them and says, "Here is your King!"

It is that temptation that confronts us today and every day. The temptation to confess with our lips, but deny with our lives that Christ is King. We are surrounded by such cynicism – the manipulation of images, our feelings, our values for financial or political gain. It is hard for us not to succumb. But in that image of a scorned and mocked Christ clad in Rome's imperial purple with a crown of thorns, in that image Pilate was using for his own purposes, to rile the crowd, to deflect his responsibility, in that image there was one who was pure, one who was sincere. It was Jesus Christ, who went from there to the cross, died and was raised, Jesus Christ our King who demands our allegiance, our truth, our all.