

Sermon – November 21, 2021
“Are you the King of the Jews?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 18:33-37

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words that they may become a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to abundant life and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word today. Amen

Good morning! It is good to see everyone in person this morning. We may not be aware, but we have come to the last Sunday of the Christian year. Today, in the Christian tradition, is Christ the King Sunday. It is the day when we turn our focus from what Jesus reveals to us about God, as he proclaims the word, teaches, and heals in Israel, to Christ as King. Next Sunday is the beginning of Advent, the beginning of another Christian year. We will move from Christ as King to the anticipation of the coming of Christ to the world. Next week, we will begin again the cycle of the Christian year. Next Sunday marks a new year and the Charge will gather, as many as are brave enough, at 7:00 a.m., sunrise, at the Mallard Bay clubhouse to watch the sun rise on the new year. We will then gather at Fairfields to share in a time of breakfast fellowship, and then have our normal Sunday worship services. This would be a good time to get those new year's resolutions for our souls ready.

Before we look briefly this morning at Christ the King, I want to open up the floor to anyone who would like to share how they were provoked or provoked someone to love this past week. For those who may not have been with us last week, in the sermon I encouraged us to begin to seek ways to provoke each other not to frustration, but to love, so that we might become

known as those “Love-Provoking Methodists.” So, let’s take a few moments and share what love-provoking actions we received or attempted to give. As I told you last week, I am not an expert at provoking love, so I am anxious to hear what you might have tried or experienced, failures and successes. Just don’t embarrass anyone or break any type of confidentiality. Anyone have something they are willing to share?

Let me share my own experiences. I received get well cards, had people share uplifting music videos, prayers, texts of encouragement, phone calls, and I even got a response to an email I had sent to the Seedbed Team giving me new insights into my question about worship. My attempts this week to provoke others to love were to isolate and get tested for COVID and send words of encouragement to others. Let me encourage us all to continue to seek to find ways to provoke each other to love in this coming week, and come to worship prepared to share our experiences so that we may all grow in our ability and willingness to provoke each other to love.

I have found that one of the most difficult concepts for someone who grew up in the United States to understand is that of a king or kingship. Those who study history have some concept as they encounter kings in history, but for most of us, and I have found this especially true for young elementary school age children, the idea of a king or kingship is a challenge. Let me offer a definition of a king I found in a systematic theology book that I have found helpful, “A king is a sovereign invested with supreme authority, that he may rule over a certain people, according to just laws, that he may have power to reward the good and punish the evil, and that he may defend his subjects.”ⁱ A key point is the idea of supreme authority, or unchecked authority. There is no authority over a king. Another key point is “rule over a certain people.” People make up the kingdom over which the king has supreme authority. And a final point is that a king must know the difference between good and evil. Has anyone ever met a king? My parents, while on a tour to Thailand, actually had an audience with the King and Queen of Thailand. I was never quite sure how that came about or what the connection was with the group they were touring with, but my mother was very impressed by that experience. This question, “Have we ever met a king?” for a Christian, is a bit of a trick question. The answer is yes if we have accepted Jesus as our savior. If we believe in Jesus, then we have met a king and not just a king, but *the* King.

Another interesting resource for ideas about kings is the Bible. There we will find many examples of good kings and some really bad kings spread across the history of the people of

Israel, kings who struggle with God's definition of good and evil and guide the people into their own ideas of good and evil. Among the kings, David stands out as a man who as a king sought after God with all his heart. In 2 Samuel 23:3-5, we find an oracle of David about a king. There David shares, "One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land." These words paint an image in our minds of a beautiful moment when the rising sun catches the water drops on the wet grass, and the sun's light is broken into millions of flashing reflections. David speaks these words about his own kingship and about a coming lasting kingship that will be a lasting blessing to the people. David points us to one who will rule justly, the desire of those who are ruled by a king. The people also long for such a beautiful ruler who rules in the fear of God, one who follows God's true concept of good and evil.

Let me place this morning's scripture reading in the context of John's Gospel. Jesus is in Pilate's house in Jerusalem. Jesus has been brought there by the Sanhedrin, the ruling class of Israel, with the request that Pilate put Jesus to death. Jesus has asked the Sanhedrin for a fair hearing of all that he has done, taught, and said during his ministry, but has instead received a slap on the faceⁱⁱ and been brought bound to Pilate with the request for his execution. Pilate has been outside of his house speaking with those who brought Jesus to him. He has gone out to them so that they may not become unclean by entering his house and thus not able to participate in the Passover festival. Those who care so much about the Law have come to have Jesus put to death.ⁱⁱⁱ After hearing their request, Pilate has come back into his house to talk with Jesus. It is at this point Pilate begins his judgement process by asking questions of the accused. He asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" One of the first questions that may come to our mind when we hear this question is "Why does Pilate ask Jesus this question?" We should understand that Pilate has been set as governor over Israel to keep the peace. A king and his followers who would try to fight against Roman rule would be a threat to the peace that Pilate is seeking to keep and would need to be dealt with decisively and quickly.^{iv} A failure to keep peace in the land would cost Pilate his job. Pilate's historic reputation for the years he is governor in Israel is a reputation of a brutal keeper of the peace. Those who are political enemies of Rome and Roman rule must be eliminated. Others can be disciplined and released for their crimes, but those who oppose Rome must die. Rome has not set a king over Israel since Herod the Great. Pilate, with this question, is seeking to determine if Jesus is a political enemy who needs to die.

Notice the movement of control in this passage. Pilate begins with control because the Roman soldiers he commands give him might. Jesus does not let Pilate control this discussion, however, and takes control by asking Pilate questions instead of directly answering Pilate's questions. Instead of declaring himself a king, Jesus asks for the source of Pilate's information about him.

Jesus replies to Pilate's questions with his own question, not directly denying he is a king or answering Pilate's question. Jesus is clearly in control of this discussion. Pilate responds that he is not a Jew and that Jesus has been handed over to him by the leaders of Israel. Pilate makes it clear that he will look to Rome's interest in this situation and seeks to regain control over this hearing, asking Jesus "What have you done?" Jesus' response does not make the claim he is the King of the Jews, but points to Jesus' kingdom, a kingdom that Jesus will three times in his answer point out is a kingdom not from this world, and assures Pilate that his followers will not fight to prevent him from being placed into the hands of Rome. Jesus has said his kingdom is not from this world, and so it is not a kingdom in conflict with Rome. Proof for his claim is that there are no followers fighting against Rome or Israel to prevent him being arrested and handed over to Pilate for judgement. Jesus provides Pilate assurance that there will be no terrorists among his followers fighting against Rome.

Once again, Pilate asks Jesus a question based on Jesus' answer, "So you are a king?" Jesus in his reply does not deny that he is a king but changes the conversation to why he has come to the world, not to be a king, but to testify to the truth. Remember, Jesus is the good shepherd and those who hear his voice, who are his, know his voice and come to him.^v Pilate has no interest in truth. He hears Jesus' voice but does not seek the truth Jesus offers. Pilate is only concerned that Jesus is not a king seeking to rise up in Israel and challenge Rome's rule. Pilate will turn and leave Jesus to go and talk with the Sanhedrin about releasing Jesus. Pilate has no concern for a leader whose kingdom is not from here, from the area around Israel, and whose followers will not fight. Pilate does not understand Jesus' words about truth. Pilate has no idea what a divine king from another place will mean to Rome and its striving for dominion. He has decided that Jesus may be a king from somewhere, but he is not a threat to Pilate's control over Israel or to Rome's interests in the area. At best, he will discipline Jesus and release him to testify to the truth. Pilate leaves Jesus and goes to talk again with the Sanhedrin about his plan to

release Jesus. Pilate will be back and Jesus will testify fully to the truth, but that is a topic for another day.

Pilate's exchange with Jesus leaves us at this point in our look at this limited section of scripture with the question, "What does it mean for Jesus to be our king?" We have David's words that paint an image of a king over us who is just, ruling in the fear of God and is like the rising of the sun on a still damp morning. Jesus comes as a humble king riding on a donkey and not as a military ruler who will conquer with force. Jesus is not crowned by humans as a king but accepts the crown of thorns, is lifted up on a cross, and dies so that he may receive glory and honor and power through his willing death and be crowned by God with glory that is everlasting. Jesus will testify to the truth that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus comes from another place, from heaven and not from the world. Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, but is a kingdom breaking into this world. Jesus comes not as a human seeking to be a just king ruling in fear of God, but as God ruling in righteousness. Jesus does not demand that we follow him as king, but that we submit willingly to his rule. Jesus does not rule from a great distance, sending out decrees and rules through governors and representatives and propped up by military might to keep order in his kingdom. Jesus comes to each of his citizens who will open their hearts and accept him, and he will abide with them, giving them each the power they need, through the Holy Spirit, to live in his kingdom and to follow his righteous ordinances allowing them to live lives honoring God. Our response to Jesus as king is not to ask for a king to rule over us as much as it is for a king to have us, all of us.

When Jesus turns the question to truth in his dialogue with Pilate, Pilate turns away in disinterest. This is the way of the world; the world is not interested in truth but in power and understanding of good and evil secured through might. On this Christ the King Sunday, we are also confronted with Jesus as king and we have the opportunity to ask ourselves, "Is Jesus our king or are we following the kings of the world? Are we interested in the truth for which Jesus came and testified or will we follow the world and its untrue offerings?" If we decide to listen to the good shepherd's voice and seek truth that comes from above, then we will seek to place Jesus as king over our lives and become a citizen of the kingdom of God. Following Jesus puts us at odds with the rulers of this world, but allows the King of Glory to defend us for all eternity. Pilate asked Jesus if he was "the King of the Jews," and Jesus did not deny that he was their

King. This is the question asked of us who lay claim to the Kingdom of God, “Is Jesus our King?” The Christian year ends with a glimpse of Christ the King standing before a ruler of the world offering truth. Jesus the King is “the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” He is Christ the King, the Almighty. Jesus is the King who dies in order to receive all authority and power for eternity. Is Christ our King? Come Lord Jesus, come, and take authority over our lives, have all of us, rule over us, empower us to be citizens of a kingdom not from this world, who bow in worship in response to your truth and reign in our lives.

Pray with me: Father God, we give you praise that you sent Jesus to become the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus, we open our hearts to you this day. Have all of us and come and rule in our lives, now and forever. Amen

ⁱ Oden

ⁱⁱ NIV commentary

ⁱⁱⁱ NIV Commentary

^{iv} Reference to Pilate’s cruelty

^v NIV Commentary