

Scripture

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

9 As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.

10 A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousand served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgement,
and the books were opened.

13 As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.

14 To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.

John 18:33-37

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36 Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' 38 Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Sermon:

Today is a special day – it is the final Sunday of the year. For all of you who are suddenly checking your calendars and wondering how you could possibly have missed the entire Christmas season, you can relax. The calendar year has not ended unexpectedly – it is the church year that is drawing to a close.

Every year in the church we progress through a series of Holy Days that lays out for us the story of the gospel. It begins in late November or early December with Advent – our time of waiting for the arrival of our Saviour. Advent leads to Christmas Day on which we remember the birth of Jesus – the divine Spirit coming to dwell in a house of flesh – Emmanuel - God with us.

Christmas gives way to epiphany; a season of discovery marked by stories of the disciples and others realizing, in fits and starts, that Jesus was in fact the embodied God.

Lent is the 40 day period leading up to Easter; typically this is a time of serious reflection and self-assessment. It's a time of self-realization, as we awake to the fact that on our own we have little reason to hope. We are desperately in need of a rescuer; someone who has the ability to set us free from our cycles of sin, guilt, and the despair that leads unto death. The mood of Lent is not unlike watching a disaster unfolding in slow motion – we know that something terrible is about to happen and that we are powerless to stop it.

Lent culminates in Easter – three days of crushing tragedy and grief that wonderfully and unexpectedly is redeemed by God. The events of Easter form the core of our faith. Easter morning is the moment in which God takes all the evil, hate, and sin that was directed at Jesus and transforms it, returning back to us as grace, love, and forgiveness. On Easter weekend God answers our word of death with his declaration of a love that can never die.

From Easter we move to the season of Pentecost, the period in which the early church was born. During Pentecost we read of the early church leaders acting in the power and authority of the Holy Spirit.

Year after year our scripture readings follow this same pattern, so that in our worship we are continually remembering and walking within and alongside the New Testament, beginning with the birth of Jesus, his self-revelation, his death, resurrection, and ascension, and finally the establishment and empowerment of Christ's church. We are continually relearning the story by continually reliving the story.

And today is the culmination; it's the final Sunday of the year, in which all has been revealed that is going to be revealed until Jesus' return. This is Christ the King Sunday, in which we recognize Jesus as the ultimate power in the universe, the one who is, who ever was, and who always will be.

Today we declare that Jesus the Messiah, the anointed, the firstborn of the new creation, the Son of God, is our only king; the only authority to whom we will bow.

That is a very strong statement, that Jesus is our only authority. Clearly Jesus isn't living at 24 Sussex Drive. Nor at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Jesus' face is not imprinted on our money. We don't speak of Jesus in our courthouses, nor in our schools.

While we are blessed to live in a country that is head and shoulders above most of the rest of the world as far as freedoms, security, and opportunity – it is also the case that our home still contains significant elements of poverty, violence, and oppression. It's not quite Jesus' country, is it?

So what do we mean when we declare Jesus as king? I certainly hope these are not merely empty words – if so, then everything we do here is for nothing – mere dust in the wind.

Does Christ rule in our lives, and if so, what does that rule look like?

This morning's gospel reading of Jesus before Pilate gives us a revealing comparison between two leaders; one an earthly steward, the other the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Let's look at both of them – beginning with Pilate. Pilate was a prefect, an appointee of the Roman Emperor who was charged with administering over the province of Judah. Though not quite a king, he acted much like one – he commanded the armies, collected taxes, spent money on public works, enforced the law, was a benefactor to those he favoured, and imprisoned or killed those he did not.

Pilate had free reign to rule Judah as he saw fit; there were really only two things that Rome demanded of him: to keep tax money flowing back to Roman coffers, and make sure that the locals never forgot that Rome was in charge.

Pilate took the second part of his charge quite seriously. When we read John's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate a little more broadly than just the verses selected for this morning we find that Pilate is quite enthusiastic in his exercise of power.

The religious leaders had brought Jesus before Pilate accusing him of impersonating the Messiah. Pilate kind of brushed the whole Messiah issue aside and instead questioned Jesus asking 'Are you a king?' Pilate wasn't worried about religious blasphemy; he was concerned about a possible threat to his own power.

Not understanding Jesus' response to his question, Pilate had him flogged – brutally whipped – and then brought back before him for a second round of questioning. At this second encounter Pilate bragged about his power. He said 'Don't you know that I have the power to let you go, and also the power to nail you to a cross?' Pilate was intent on proving to Jesus that he was the one in control.

But when we look a little deeper we see a very different picture. Pilate was far from being in control. In his exchanges with Jesus, Jesus always seemed to have the upper hand. Jesus directed the conversation in the directions that he wanted; he ignored questions from Pilate, asked questions of his own, and directly told Pilate that he didn't possess any power that actually belonged to him.

Despite Jesus being a beaten prisoner in chains, Pilate was not even able to compel Jesus to answer a simple question. Clearly Pilate was not in control of Jesus, in fact, he was on the defensive.

When we look at the larger situation, we find that not only can Pilate not control Jesus, he also can't control the other people that he is supposed to be in authority over.

The religious leaders came to Pilate because they wanted Jesus killed. If Pilate were truly in charge he could have told them to shut up and go away – but he could not. Instead he was forced to pander to their demands despite the fact that he apparently didn't want to, as demonstrated by all the prevaricating, hand wringing, and hand washing that we read about.

Pilate was faced with the fact that if he didn't give Jesus' accusers what they wanted that they would stir up the people against him. Remember, rule number two was to ensure the people knew that Rome was in charge; a people in open rebellion certainly would not be recognizing Rome's rule, nor would they be paying taxes. Pilate really was caught between a rock and a hard place – afraid of the people above him, and afraid of the people below him.

Despite his bold statements to Jesus, Pilate was far from in control. Pilate lived in fear of losing control. Pilate was trapped. He couldn't make others do what he wanted, he couldn't even do what he wanted himself. The man in control of Palestine was not at all in control. The harder he tried to exercise power, the more he realized he didn't really have any. This is the drawback of earthly power – it doesn't actually belong to anybody, though many people try to claim it.

Some people seize power, but quickly realize that it can in turn be taken away by someone stronger. They must constantly live on the lookout for a challenger.

Power that is given by someone with greater authority, as in the case with Pilate, can be revoked at the whim of the Emperor.

People who are elected to power are also at risk of that power being taken back if they do not please their constituents.

The fact is that all earthly power is provisional; it can easily be taken away, so those who think they are in control usually are just the opposite. Their every decision is fraught with danger as they walk along the razor's edge of pleasing everyone they need to so that they can retain their place of privilege. They become slaves to their position.

This is exactly what Jesus pointed out to Pilate. When Pilate bragged about his power to crucify Jesus, Jesus reminded him that he had no power of his own at all – any power he might have had was given to him – it certainly was not his own. This is why Jesus couldn't be controlled by Pilate, even under threat of crucifixion. Pilate could not compel Jesus to do or say anything that he didn't want to because Pilate's source of power had no solid foundation. Pilate was a fearful man appointed by another fearful man.

Let's turn our attention toward Jesus. Already we have seen that Jesus had the upper hand in his exchanges with Pilate; he spoke with authority and confidence. That is because Jesus' authority comes from somewhere Pilate could not even imagine.

In our reading from Daniel we are introduced into the throne room of God, the Ancient of Days who sits upon a throne of flames. A thousand thousand served him, ten thousand ten thousands attended to him. This is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen. A being that is so far beyond our ability to comprehend that we can only speak of him, or her, in riddles and metaphors.

In our reading one like a human being was presented before this Ancient One, and to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. This one like a human being is who we believe Jesus is. Is it any wonder that the one whose authority was granted by eternity itself was not cowed or controlled by the puppet Pilate, whose authority was derived from a mere mortal? A smidgeon of dust in the wind? There is no comparison, no contest.

Jesus' authority is not just over human beings, but extends to cover the wind and the waves, the very forces of nature. Jesus even has authority over life and death itself. We simply can't overstate Jesus' authority and power – we only dimly comprehend the breadth and depth of it.

What we see here is that Jesus possesses true authority, where Pilate really only holds a shadow or illusion of authority. The source of authority is not the only difference. The source of authority affects the way in which that authority is wielded.

We're all familiar with the idea of a petty tyrant – one whose insecure hold on authority translates into obsession with control of every detail, and leads to jealousy, and cruelty. Pilate certainly fits this bill – tens of thousands were crucified under his leadership. His fear caused him to cling to power through intimidation.

Compare this to Jesus' use of authority. Jesus had no fear of his power being taken away, so the way he exercised his authority is completely different. Jesus didn't 'Lord his power over others' in the way that he pointed out to his disciples that worldly leaders do. Jesus used his power to serve.

Our king healed lepers, associated with the outcasts, treated women as equals, and ate with foreigners. While worldly leaders make sure to push others down, Jesus used his power to lift others up. While Pilate spread death, Jesus brought life.

This is a very different kind of kingship than what we normally conceive of. Our king does not tax and enslave – our king provides and liberates.

Nothing says it better than the events of Easter. During conflict most of our leaders stay safely behind the lines and out of danger, while our King of Kings willingly laid down his life for the least of us. This is the Kingship of Christ – life, love, sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, abundance. Do any of your elected officials offer you that?

Christ is not a tyrant king. He is a lover, a servant-witness. He calls us to be the same for others. When we declare Christ to be King, that means that we are seeking to follow Christ's example as a faithful witness, to seek his will for us, deny ourselves, and make it our purpose to bring others into his reign of love.

We are able to do these things because of the kind of King Christ is. Because we have a king who died to prove to us how much we are loved, we are confident in who we are and how much value we have. That means we have nothing to prove. We don't have to lord our position over others, we don't have to worry about doing something that appears to be below our station or position. We are able to serve in humbleness, without the insecurity and fear that comes from clutching at power.

When we associate with people labeled as outcasts, we don't worry about being pulled down by them, we draw them up and into society, making them whole, and real persons again, because this is what our king does. He did it for you. He did it for me. Knowing what Jesus has done for us gives us confidence in who we are.

This confidence allows us to be vulnerable. Vulnerability allows us to love. Love leads to healing and wholeness. Healing and wholeness are marks of the kingdom of God.

So what does it mean that we declare Christ to be king? Everything. It means everything.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.