

Four years after the end of WWI, the Catholic Church selected a new pope, Pope Pius XI. Nationalism and imperialism led to the “The Great War” which was more devastating than anyone anticipated.

The war was fought between predominantly Christian nations as WWI was essentially a civil war between Christians.

With this horrific tragedy and the fall of numerous monarchies as a backdrop, Pope Pius XI issued a papal encyclical that introduced and established the Feast of Christ the King. The encyclical opened with these words:

...manifold evils in the world were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics

Pius XI was suggesting that “by virtue of Christ’s claim to kingship as creator and redeemer, societies as well as individuals owed [Christ] obligations as king.”

Christ the King feast day would eventually make its way into broader Protestantism, including the Revised Common Lectionary which most Lutheran churches, including Arlington Hills, follow, and so Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ Sunday, falls on this, the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next Sunday, we will begin the new year, year “C” if you are keeping track, with the first Sunday of Advent. (*Can you believe it? Already?!*)

As one would assume, some of our scriptures this morning on Reign of Christ Sunday, sound very royal, very “kingly.”

The words from Daniel and Revelation that were just read give a clear picture of the final culmination of history describing Christ’s reign of the whole cosmos.

Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man shows that he will be given dominion, 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.

Likewise, we heard these words from Revelation about the final culmination of the age when we will see the Lord, the Alpha and the Omega' . . . *who is and who was and who is to come*. We believe that one day, all dominion, power, and authority will rest with Christ, the ruler of all.

But today's gospel gives a counterintuitive, an almost laughable, description of a "king."

John 18 has long been a favorite of mine:

It's a classic Hellenistic battle of wits in the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, powerless Jesus putting powerful Pilate on his heels, questions and statements about Kings and Kingdoms, and a question from Pilate that resonates down through the ages, "What is truth."

A little back story: the religious authorities want to put Jesus to death for his challenge to their authority. Their highest Jewish judicial body, the Sanhedrin, has condemned him, but they lack the power to put him to death, so they have turned him over to Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judaea. Pilate doesn't really care about interreligious Jewish squabbles, he is there to protect Rome against any revolutionary threat and his line of questioning is intended to determine if Jesus is, in fact, fomenting rebellion against Rome.

In our passage, Jesus has already been beaten and is bound before the person who holds the power of life and death. But Jesus is unphased by Pilate's power, and turns the tables on Pilate questioning Pilate's motives:

Are you a people pleaser, Pilate, just doing what others want,
or do you have your own agency and authority?

Pilate retorts that he's not a Jew and presses Jesus, "What have you done?" Jesus answers, "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.*"

Scholars and laypersons alike have wondered what is meant by Jesus' assertion that his kingdom is not from here. *Where is "here?"*

- Some strains of popular evangelical Christianity have taken "here" to mean the whole world. That is, Jesus' kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, and in no way part of this world, so all that matters is making sure your soul is saved

and that you will go to heaven when you die. Christ's kingdom in this theology is only in the heart of the follower, the heart of the true believer.

- But Jesus and scripture more broadly certainly do describe a kingdom that, while not *of this world*, *is certainly in the world*. One cannot heed Jesus' commands to care for the least of these, to love one another, love your neighbor, and even love one's enemies without being active in this world, right?

More likely, I think, the "here" Jesus is talking about relates to the immediate surroundings. Jesus is looking around at the Praetorium or court of Pilate, the seat of Roman power and authority in the region of Judea and is saying, *my kingdom is not like your Roman Empire, your political kingdom*.

And how is it not like the Pilate's kingdom, the Roman Empire?

For one thing, Jesus' says in his kingdom his followers will not fight to save him from being turned over. His is a non-violent kingdom, one of love, mercy, and forgiveness.

Jesus is critiquing Rome. Rome is a military powerhouse, Rome, a merciless, ruthless Empire. Jesus says that that is not the way of his kingdom, Jesus way is the way of non-violence and self-sacrificial suffering. Jesus is, after all, on his way to the cross. If ever there was a cause worth fighting for, would it not have been for the Son of God? But Jesus says, his followers are not to fight the authorities who will kill him.

And what of this question about truth, Pilates savvy query, **What is Truth?**

That's a great question, and is it not an incredibly timely question? Truth seems to be quite fluid these days.

A cynic today could observe that Truth is what anyone says it is. Facts don't seem to matter. Conspiracy theories abound that are not based in fact at all.

We live in a post-Enlightenment era, where facts are not self-evident. Facts don't automatically convince anyone. I know those who study conspiracy theories say that facts won't change people's minds, as counterintuitive as that sounds.

What matters is trust. The patient, constant human bridge-building is what matters. As with all relationships, it's easier said than done.

To push the truth question further, let me ask “What is the Truth” today in our nation, our “empire” if you will?

In many ways, our American empire is not that different from the Roman Empire. Like Rome, *our* society built on capitalism, where the powerful and the wealthy rule and rig the system most of the time in their favor, to maximize their profits, to ensure their benefit. A couple examples. . .

- Some of America’s marquee corporations with billions in profits each—General Electric, General Motors, Meta (owner of Facebook), Tesla and T-Mobile—paid little in federal income taxes last year and in some cases even got big refunds, according to a new analysis by Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF). Together the five companies earned over **\$70 billion in profits** yet paid an effective average tax rate of just 6.9%, while the stated corporate tax rate is 21%; and a typical American family pays 13.6%.
- Also like Rome, we are quite militaristic. The United States led the ranking of the countries with the highest military spending in 2023, with 916 billion U.S. dollars dedicated to the military. That constituted over 40 percent of the total military spending¹ worldwide that year, which amounted to 2.4 trillion [U.S.] dollars. This means that the U.S. spends more on defense *than the next 9 countries combined!*²

These are but a few ways that our country, that we,
miss the mark of God’s intention for God’s good creation,
a few examples of the **brokenness that needs healing**,

The truth from God’s perspective is that the brokenness and evil in our world, needs to be resisted for there to be healing.

The pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth, (*the seven deadly sins!*) and fear must be resisted.

The grasp that these deadly sins have on us must be resisted, must be overcome.

And so God, doing the work of healing, and restoring (*that we are unable to do*) resisted evil in the most remarkable way.

¹<https://www.statista.com/statistics/183070/shares-of-selected-countries-in-world-military-spending/>

²Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

To confront the powers of brokenness and evil, God came in powerlessness, armed only with the truth.

God's son, the king of creation,
spoke truth to the power of the religious leaders,
and the powerful reacted with anger, and rage, and murderous hatred,
and they took him to the Roman Empire,
an Empire that also could not
tolerate any possible threat to their power.

And he spoke truth to that political power too, who responded with indifference to whether Jesus lived or died, but just to be safe, had him killed, so fearful was the Empire even of a threat that was from a prophet who said,
“My kingdom is not from this world.”

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So today, friends, Jesus' words still ring true. His kingdom is not from “here.” It's not from 1st c. Rome, it's not from post-WWI Europe, and it's not from 21st c. America.

If God could resist the dark forces of the world, with powerlessness and truth,
in non-violent resistance,
maybe we can non-violently speak truth to power too,
resist the fear and hatred and darkness of the world?

What is truth? Jesus is the truth, the one who is, and was, and is to come.

On the Reign of Christ Sunday, may *our* kingdom allegiances
lie with the Empire of the S-O-N, son.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.