

Christ the King: John 18:33-37
Church of the Good Shepherd
The. Rev. W. Terry Miller
November 24, 2024

A Higher Power

We preachers are crazy people. That's true in general, but especially when it comes to the things we do to spread the Gospel. I heard recently about a pastor in Texas who liked to do "innovative" things with his sermons, to increase their impact. One stunt he tried involved driving a tank onto the platform of the church sanctuary. A tank, yes. Apparently, a member of the church worked with the military and managed to arrange a tank to be driven right up to the pulpit. The pastor then emerged from the tank, hopped down onto the platform and began preaching. Well, that's one way of to grab people's attention!

Hearing that story, I was amazed that the sanctuary was big enough and the platform strong enough to hold a tank. I was amazed even more that this pastor thought it was a perfectly acceptable idea to use *a tank* in a sermon about Jesus. I can think of few things that are more at odds with who Jesus is and what Jesus taught than a tank! A tank is a motorized weapon of war, a symbol of raw destructive power, while Jesus displayed humility and love and ministered God's grace and mercy. This preacher should know better, should know Jesus better.

Fact is, though, this pastor-in-a-tank was just mimicking what the rest of the world thinks about power, that power means being able to force others to do what you want, by violence if necessary. Whoever has the biggest army, whoever can threaten the most harm, gets to call the shots, gets to tell everyone else what to do.

This idea has been assumed by most every king, emperor and war-lord throughout history, as the justification for their rule. But it was taken to another level by totalitarian governments in the early 20th century, who made it an explicit dogma to justify their nations' assertion of power over their neighbors. It was the rise of these governments that provoked Pope Pius XI in 1925 to declare a new church holiday, the Feast of Christ the King. The purpose of this day was to affirm that it is Jesus Christ, not der Fuhrer, or the Communist Party, or any worldly leader, but Jesus alone who rules the world.

This festival, which we celebrate today, pushes back on the notion that Christianity is about purely spiritual things, like souls and going to heaven, and makes it clear that Christianity makes claims on things in our life on earth, claims that are inherently and unashamedly political. Now, coming out of a long and bitter election season, as we are, I imagine that a lot of you all are plum tired of hearing about politics. I get it. But Christ the King Sunday is not about politics in the petty, partisan sense, as in advocating for one party over another. It is political rather in a supreme sense, as in God is not just ruler of heaven, but over the whole world. He is above all earthly powers, ruling over them all as king.

That God is the one in charge has been a foundational belief of God's people from the beginning. Moses, for example, insisted that the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was more powerful than the Pharaoh, and God proved that claim by liberating his people from Egypt. The same was true with the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks—each time Israel was threatened with destruction at the hands of much stronger nations, Israel maintained that their God was sovereign over all of them and would not abandon his people.

When Jesus came along, it was the Roman Empire that claimed to rule the world. But Jesus' followers boldly insisted that, like God, Jesus, God's Son, was Lord and King, even over the Emperor Caesar. "Jesus is Lord" was in fact the earliest statement of faith for Christians. This wasn't just a theological statement, mind you. When the first Christians made that confession, they were well aware that they were setting themselves at odds with Rome. They understood that their pledge of allegiance to Jesus was seditious and dangerous, as it was a direct challenge to Caesar, then the most powerful man in the world, who ruled from Gibraltar to Jerusalem and from Britain to the Black Sea, a man who had the power over life and death for millions of people. But to Jesus' followers, Caesar was a pretender, a usurper of Christ's authority as the true ruler of the world.

Caesar seemed to have all the power, they acknowledged, but Jesus showed by his life and ministry that that just wasn't so, demonstrating a rule that was both mightier and more humane than Caesar's. Instead of threatening death, Jesus healed the sick. Instead of compelling obedience, he called people to follow him willingly. Instead of lording power over others, he taught his followers to serve their neighbors.

Sometimes Jesus was put on the spot, and pressed to speak out against Caesar, such as when he was asked to denounce the imperial tax. But Jesus wouldn't play along, wouldn't be trapped. He was never one to challenge Caesar's power directly, choosing instead to undermine the foundation of Caesar's authority. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he told the people, "and to God what belongs to God," the point being that Caesar may have a claim on your money, but God deserves our whole-hearted allegiance.

The rivalry between these two kings lingered in the background for much of Jesus' life. Only at the end did the two opposing rules come into direct conflict. The Gospel I just read describes the scene. Jesus has been arrested and brought to the court of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for questioning. Pilate, a representative of the empire, sits in judgement over Jesus. He has all the power in this situation. Jesus's hands are tied, literally. He's defenseless, his followers have deserted him. And yet it is Pilate and the whole imperial system that is being judged.

Pilate asks if Jesus is a king, but Jesus refuses to the title. He knows full well what being a "king" means, and what it would mean for him to make such a claim in Caesar's Rome. Instead, he says to Pilate, "my kingdom is not from this world." So Jesus *is* a king, but not like any other king. For his rule is not from the world—not "not *of* this world," as in otherworldly, but not "*from* this world," not based on what other kingdoms are based on, namely, violence and the threat of violence.

Oh, Jesus could, if he wanted, call an army of his followers, as he says, to defend himself. But that's not what he is about, that's not where his authority comes from. What gives Jesus authority, and what makes him so dangerous to Pilate and others like him, isn't having a bigger army or being able to put people to death. Rather, the power that Jesus wields is the truth. "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

This is central to understanding Jesus' authority. You see, Jesus' kingship is based not on demanding or demeaning or defeating others with force but on the truth, the truth, that is, about life, the truth about reality, about the world that God made, the world that God loves, the world that God is bringing back to rights, not by domineering over the wills of people, but by calling people to align themselves with him. That's the truth that Jesus came to testify to, to demonstrate, to embody. Jesus' authority was not based on any personal power or ability, but on his alignment with the larger truth of God's rule.

For rulers like Pilate, though, truth doesn't matter. It's irrelevant. Truth is what they say it is, what those in power find useful. And if you don't agree, they've got a sword, a rifle, a cross that says otherwise. And yet truth that is subject to manipulation like that isn't truth, it's propaganda, which is just another way for those in power to dominate people, to maintain and expand their control.

Truth, real truth, exists outside of us. It is independent of our desires and preferences. It doesn't care if it is useful or politically correct or advantageous to one side or another. Sure, we might say, humbly, that we only see part of the truth. But there is such a thing as truth, which we all have to acknowledge. Those in power can deny it, attack it, but they can do nothing to defeat it. Dictators can use violence to compel someone to live a lie, to act as if the truth is something other than it is, but the truth will come out. Tyrants can deny reality, can deny the truth of God, but reality has a way of reasserting itself.

Just like when we ignore warnings about our health, we get sick. Or we ignore feedback from constituents, and we lose the election. Or we ignore the laws of supply and demand, spending and taxation, and we get inflation and debt. Oh, 'we know better,' we say. 'This time it's different.' 'We're not like everyone else.' But, just like when Wile E. Coyote chases the Roadrunner right off a cliff, seemingly in defiance of the laws of gravity, but then reality comes crashing down, quite literally, when we fail to acknowledge the reality of God and God's rule, reality *will* reassert itself. Truth can be stretched but it will inevitably and painfully snap back.

This is why it's so important for those with power to acknowledge a truth beyond themselves, to submit to an authority above them. For without that recognition, without submitting to that reality, those in power will think they deserve their position and feel they can do whatever they want. They will be limited only by what they can get away with. Might makes right. That was how it was for most rulers throughout history. That we today insist that our leaders are accountable to something higher than themselves, not just to the consent of the people, but to a

higher standard, a higher authority, *that* is directly attributable to Christianity and the example Jesus gave. Where before, might makes right, now might *serves* right.

What Jesus' rule shows is that power cannot be its own end. It must serve a greater purpose, must be devoted to a higher good, must be sacrificed, offered up, to a higher reality, to God. Without that higher good that it is turned towards, power becomes a fetish, an idol, a demon, harming the wielder and those whom it is wielded over. Indeed, misery is the legacy of every ruler who seeks power for its own sake, and refuses accountability to God.

This is not to say that atheists, those who don't believe in God, are uniquely unfit for office. But you can see why they would be, and why their unbelief used to be seen as disqualifying them for a position of public trust. It wasn't bigotry, or chauvinism. It came from an appreciation that, if a person didn't believe in God, didn't fear God, then they cannot be trusted with power. For, without the fear of God, nothing will stop a person from abusing their power. No law would be sufficient to restrain them. That was the thinking, the wisdom beyond it.

And, to be fair, there are plenty of believers who are "practical atheists," people who say they are Christian but who act no different from those who do not believe in God. And it's true, great atrocities have been done in the name of God or religion, more often by those who distort the faith than by genuine adherents. Think of that pastor driving a tank into church.

But apart from God, man is capable of even greater evil. The history of the 20th century, with its Holocausts and genocides and massacres carried out by secular governments, shows us what we are capable of when power is its own end and might is not connected to truth, when man's rule is not conformed to God's rule.

This is why I say all people, not just us Christians, but all people should be celebrating the Feast of Christ the King today, why we should all be in favor of Christ as ruler of the world. For the alternatives—kings and shahs, emperors and presidents—we've seen what their rule is like, where that leads us. Christ's rule, by contrast, promises life and peace and grace. Why would we prefer any other king? Thanks be to God!