

# Are you the King of the Jews?

Hespeler, 21 November 2021 © Scott McAndless – Reign of Christ  
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Psalm 93, Revelation 1:4-8, [John 18:33-37](#)

**T**his Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year, is traditionally called Christ the King Sunday. Or some people prefer to avoid that explicitly masculine language and say Reign of Christ Sunday. But, whatever you call it, it is pretty clear what the day is all about. It is all about how great our guy is. It is about how Jesus is better, stronger, faster and cooler than any other ruler out there. And that's our guy.

And you don't have to look very far in the scriptures to find Jesus presented in those terms. We have, for example, that passage from the Book of Daniel that Christians have long claimed as a description of the Christ: **"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. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."** The same kind of imagery is taken up in the Book of Revelation which speaks of, **"Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."**

## Some Hesitations

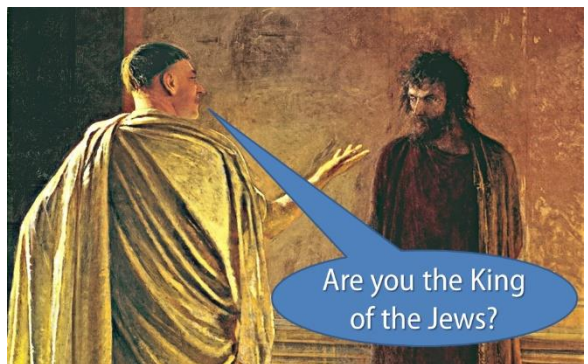
And, on the one hand, I am all for that. I am so glad to be on team Jesus and know that we are the winning team because Jesus is the one who gets to rule over all. I certainly agree that no one deserves to rule any more than him. And yet, at the same time, I can't help but feel a few niggling hesitations in the back of my mind.

After all, isn't that the kind of thinking that has gotten the Christian church into a fair bit of trouble down through the centuries. It was the kind of thinking that inspired the medieval Crusaders who sought to extend the rule of Jesus and his church over the peoples of the Near East with extreme violence whether they wanted it or not.

The same idea drove the Conquistadors who first invaded this hemisphere and did it in the name of King Jesus. They, driven by this idea that Jesus must rule over all the nations of the earth, committed horrible things, wiping out and enslaving entire nations of people. Those are but a couple of horrible examples and they make me wonder, is that what it means to claim Christ as our king?

## A Better Way to Think of it?

It is enough, at least, to make me want to look elsewhere in the Bible to ask if there might not be a more nuanced way to look at what it means to call Jesus our King. The passage we read this morning from the Gospel of John discusses the issue, but it certainly approaches it very differently. It is in the form of a conversation between two fascinating figures:



Jesus of Nazareth and Pontius Pilate. And the thing that particularly fascinates me about this conversation is that it consists of Pilate asking Jesus a series of questions about his kingship. And in every case, Pilate doesn't quite seem to get a straight answer. I'm not saying that Jesus' answers are evasive because I don't think they are, but they are also not really clear either.

## Eavesdropping on a Private Conversation

The other odd thing about it, of course, is that it appears to be a *private* conversation between two individuals. Jesus certainly did not have the opportunity to pass on the content of such a conversation, at least not before his death. And there is no reason to think that Pilate should have told anyone about what was said either. So, we must ask, how did the gospel writer even know what was said? The answer, obviously, is that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Somehow, God told him what it was that needed to be said at that moment.

But, I have noticed something. This is actually something that happens a lot in the Bible where we get a report on something that was said or done and there were no actual witnesses. And it seems that when the Holy Spirit does reveal what was going on in those kinds of situations, what we are told is always of deep theological importance. It is almost as if the Holy Spirit is more interested in getting theological points across than in just making sure that we know exactly what happened and what was said.

## Pilate's First Question

So, I would invite you to look very closely at this conversation between Jesus and Pilate. In particular, pay attention to those questions that Pilate asks because, I think, if you can answer them for yourself, you may get a whole lot closer to understanding what it really means to call Jesus your king.

The first question Pilate asks is, **"Are you the King of the Jews?"** And I would note, first of all, that that is a very safe angle to approach the whole question of the kingship of Jesus from. Because, of course, whatever else he is, Pilate is not a Jew. Pilate is Roman who knows very well who holds authority over him. In fact, as procurator of Judea, he has a very well-defined chain of command and answers directly to the emperor. So, very clearly, Pilate begins to examine the question of the kingship of Jesus with a secure knowledge that any kingship Jesus has doesn't apply to him.

## Christ's Kingship as it Applies to Others

And I honestly feel as if that is as far as many Christians get in their understanding of the kingship of Jesus. They want to acknowledge Jesus as king, but when they think of where the kingly authority of Jesus applies, they'd rather just think of how it applies to *other* people. After all, was not that the kingship of Jesus that the Crusaders and the Conquistadors were trying to establish? They fought for and even gave their lives for the goal of trying to make Jesus the king of other people – of Middle Easterners and of the indigenous people of the Western hemisphere. And, of course, what that generally amounted to was them imposing the power of European monarchs and rulers upon those people.

But I don't think that it's just Christians in those extreme situations who have done that. I think all of us, at least at times, are tempted to think of the kingship of Jesus only in terms of what that means for other people. We want to use it to impose certain kinds of morality upon society or to do things like impose rigid gender roles or laws and measures that only benefit people like us. It is certainly a very safe way to think of the kingship because we don't need to change anything in ourselves, and we can actually use it to force changes onto others that suit us.

But, you see, such a safe concept of kingship will never survive an actual encounter with the living Christ. And so Jesus immediately pushes back at Pilate's question. **"Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?"** he wants to know. You see, Jesus is not going to allow us to simply hold that question of his rule over our lives at a distance. He doesn't care what other people may have told us about what his kingship means. There is something about Jesus that forces us, the more we come into contact with him, into asking what it means to us and on our own terms.

## Pilate's Second Question

And so, that brings us to Pilate's second question. **"Do you think I am a Jew?"** And I love the way that question is translated in the Good News Bible. Pilate seems so defensive. He started out so certain that, whatever it was, Jesus' kingship had absolutely nothing to do with him. And yet, with only a few words, Jesus has already got him questioning that. He is still trying to laugh it off, but he is already wondering whether at least Jesus might think he does have some kingly claim over him.

## What does Jesus' Answer Mean?

This leads to what is perhaps the most important thing that Jesus says about his rule. **"My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here!"** I know that this has often been taken to mean that the kingdom that Jesus is talking about has nothing to do with this world – that it is only concerned with getting people out of this world and into heaven, but I don't think that that is what I hear Jesus saying. Jesus is here talking about how his kingdom works and saying that it does not operate according to the methods of this world which are the methods of violence and "might makes right."

So no, Jesus' followers in this world are not called on to fight to establish his rule – the Crusaders and Conquistadores definitely got that one wrong – but that does not mean that Christ's rule has nothing to do with this world. If Christ is King, that really does demand something of Pilate in this world even as it demands something of you and of me.

## Pilate's Third Question

And that brings us to Pilate's final question, **"Are you a king, then?"** With this question, Pilate finally gets around to the foundational question. There are now no guardrails, no built-in safety barriers. He is now considering the possibility, not that Jesus is somebody else's king, not that it matters only to Jews, but that it might just matter to *him*.

And that is where Jesus will finally bring us all, to the realization that who he is is actually supposed to make a difference in our daily lives. And Jesus makes that clear with his answer. **"You**

**say that I am a king.”** It doesn't matter what other people say. Whatever you force them to say or do in the name of Jesus, will ultimately come to nothing because that kingdom cannot be forced upon anybody because it's not a kingdom of this world in that way. All that matters is what *you* say and what it changes about *your* life.

## My Troubles with the Day

This Sunday, the last Sunday in the church's year, has been called Christ the King Sunday for a very long time. And for most of that time, the church celebrated it as something that was largely imposed on other people. It was about the Crusaders and the Conquistadors. It was about missionaries travelling to far distant lands to bring the people that lived in those strange places under the rule of Christ.

And with that missionary endeavour, went the forces of colonialism which was all about bringing them under European control and about “civilizing” them in a way that did not honour the civilizations that they had built over the millennia. It was rather about them adopting our cultural values and morals. It didn't really have very much to do with the King Jesus who was talking that day with Pontius Pilate just a little bit before he was condemned to death.

For that reason, I've always had a little bit of trouble with Christ the King Sunday. And I have the same problem with it even if you call it Reign of Christ Sunday. But I present before you today the three questions that the Gospel of John tells us Pilate asked of Jesus in that private conversation. They are not there for the sake of the Roman procurator. What he finally decided about the rule of Christ and how it applied to him doesn't matter to anybody but him.

## The Questions are for You

Those questions are there for you. And they are especially there for you if you have always thought of the reign of Christ in terms of what that means for other people. If all it means to you is that everybody in our society needs to defer to Jesus – for example, if you think the rule of Christ means that the rest of our society needs to shut down and close everything on Sundays so that people don't have anything else to do but go to church, you may have the wrong concept of Christ the King. If you think it's okay to mock or discriminate against people because they are not Christian, you probably have the wrong concept of Christ the King. If you think that Christians have the right to tell everyone else how to live their lives just because they are followers of Christ, you probably have the wrong concept of Christ the King.

John wants you to ask of him, **“Are you the king of the Jews?” “Do you think I am a Jew?”** And **“Are you a king, then?”** He doesn't care what you think other people need to do, he needs to know what difference it makes in your life today that Christ is the king. He needs to see it being lived out in the way that you care about others, how you welcome the strangers and how you honour people for who they are. His kingdom is not of this world, not in the sense that we use the power of this world to impose it on anybody. It is a kingdom of love and care and only that can actually transform this world.