

Holding Court

Although it didn't turn out as he hoped, President Trump's visit to Great Britain last July presented some interesting challenges to Queen Elizabeth and her government. Months before he came, the President let it be known (Perhaps in a tweet. I don't remember.) that he would very much like to ride with the Queen in a gilded carriage. He'd like to ride from the mall, along the Royal Mews to Buckingham Palace, sitting beside Queen and giving the royal wave to adoring crowds.

President Putin of Russia was treated that carriage ride, and so was President Xi Jinping of China. Mr. Trump wanted the same royal treatment.

That didn't quite work out. Due to massive protests in London and the appearance of a certain balloon, Mr. Trump had to settle for dinner at Blenheim Palace, a conference with the Prime Minister at Chequers, and tea with the Queen at Windsor Castle. He then flew up to Scotland for a golf weekend.

Not quite what he hoped for, but certainly a version of the royal treatment. In the world we live in, it's getting harder and harder to figure out who's a genuine monarch and who just plays one on TV.

Procurator Pontius Pilate in today's Gospel reading does not suffer the same confusion. He knows full well who is royalty and who amongst the numerous monarchs of his day is monarch *numero uno*. It's his boss, Emperor Tiberius, also known as Caesar.

Caesar is the high king. No doubt about that, and Pilate's job as procurator of Judea is to see that in Judea, it stays that way. He's not altogether sure what's behind the fracas over this man Jesus, who stands before him now. Something about a charge of blasphemy under the Jewish law. That's none of Pilate's concern. There is, however, a charge Pilate is obliged to take seriously, and that's the charge of sedition. Word is, Jesus claims to be "King of the Jews."

Now, Pilate doesn't begrudge the Jews a King. Kings in Caesar's Empire are a dime a dozen and can be quite useful for keeping the locals in their place. The problem is, the Jews already have a king. A sorry sort of monarch, to be sure, is King Herod, but he's on Caesar's approved list, so that's that. Any "King of the Jews"

allowed on Pilate's turf must be of the miniature variety, the kind that fits neatly into Caesar's pocket.

Pilate looks at Jesus. This fellow doesn't seem to be the kind of person who will fit into anyone's pocket. How can a man whose hands are bound hold himself with such dignity? How can a prisoner who's just been worked over by the temple police not cringe in the presence of a Roman Governor justly famed for his brutality?

Something isn't adding up. Jesus is no more than a peasant, a rabbi from Nazareth. Yet there is something about him. "Regal" is obviously the wrong word, but what is the right one?

According to John's Gospel, Pilate goes to considerable lengths to find out. Jesus' accusers won't go into Pilate's headquarters for fear of ritual defilement, so Pilate goes out to them. Back and forth he goes – in to Jesus, then out to the crowd, back in to Jesus, back out to the crowd – more courier than procurator. Who's in charge here – Pilate or his prisoner?

Pilate's soldiers ram a crown of thorns on Jesus' head and dress him up in a purple cloak. "**Hail, King of the Jews,**" they cry as they punch him in the face.

Pilate goes out to the crowd again. "**Look, I'm bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him**" (18:4). Judicial-sounding words, but then he leads Jesus out, still bleeding and dressed in that crown and cloak. If there's no case against Jesus, why have him beaten? If he's not a king, why dress him up as one?

Pilate is caught between a rock and a hard place. He doesn't want to execute Jesus, yet he can't risk giving the impression that he's soft on sedition. He can't have people going around claiming to be king. "**Everyone who claims to be king sets himself against the Emperor,**" the crowd reminds Pilate, as though he needed to be reminded of that (18:12). On the other hand, Pilate doesn't want this man's blood on his hands.

Why? I wonder. Is it because he thinks Jesus is innocent? Or is it because he is afraid of Jesus? Yes, I know that seems absurd. What could a man like Pilate, surrounded as he is by security guards and backed up by none other than Tiberius Caesar himself, have to fear from Jesus?

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks him.

“My kingdom is not from this world . . .”

“So, you are a king?”

“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” (18:37).

Like a college sophomore who’s had his first philosophy course, or a weary politician who’s seen the sausage being made for too long, Pilate shrugs. **“What is truth?”** he asks (18:38).

John’s Gospel is clear about this: For Pilate to know the answer, he’ll have to look more closely at Jesus. The answer to his question is right there, staring him straight in the face.

Pilate turns away, of course. Wouldn’t you? Don’t you? Don’t we all?”

Today is the Festival of Christ the King. A curious liturgical event, this. Unlike Easter or Advent, the Festival of Christ the King is not an ancient tradition. It wasn’t introduced until 1925 and didn’t settle on the last Sunday of the church year until 1968. Despite its relatively recent origins, observing this day is useful, even for us Americans who got rid of secular monarchs a long time ago. It’s useful because it calls upon us to stand alongside Pilate and confront Christ the King.

Oh, it’s fine to say that Jesus is “my *personal* Lord and Savior.” That keeps our claims about him uncontroversial, a matter of personal preference, a consumer choice. But to say that “Jesus is Lord” or “Christ is King” – that’s something else altogether, isn’t it?

To say that Christ is King is to say that those who serve him are not volunteers, but subjects, people under authority. Life isn’t about making free choices after all. It’s about following orders, obeying commands, rendering allegiance. To say that Christ is King is to bow in homage and to conform our wills to his.

Pilate cannot do this, of course. He already serves another king -- Caesar who brooks no rivals. Kings who do not fit into Caesar’s pocket must be eliminated.

It's the same for you and me. The monarchs who vie for our allegiance today are no less jealous and no less ruthless. They're just subtler.

Sometimes they dress up in a cloak that looks very much like Christ's, but it's not purple; it's red, white, and blue.

Sometimes, rather than bark orders, these monarchs beckon with siren song. "Buy this, and you'll be happy. Own this, and you'll feel complete."

Especially at this time of year, the rivals to Christ the King even use the language of faith. Christmas carols are sung in the shopping mall, on the radio, in the public square. Consumers hum along as the choir sings it praises to "Christ the Lord, the newborn King," – a song to stimulate sentimentality and grease the wheels of commerce.

To say that Christ is King is to make a public declaration. It is to say, "We belong to Christ and to his realm." We live in his dominion, whatever our passports say. We subjects of Christ the King are sojourners in our own land, resident aliens no matter what our nationality. Resident aliens have to have a registration card, a "green card." Our green card is our baptism, and it never expires.

To say that Christ is King is to live in a counter-kingdom, what Jesus calls "**a kingdom not of this world.**" This does not mean a kingdom whose ruler cares nothing for justice or peace, but a realm that does not depend upon the world's structures and often escapes the notice of those who, like Pilate, think that they're in charge.

Recall a scene outside the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. in the darkest days of apartheid. Bishop Desmond Tutu, fully aware that back home black people are being killed and imprisoned, stands with a band of protestors who are singing Easter hymns, of all things. Bishop Tutu cries through a bullhorn to the officials inside the embassy:

"You think you are in control. You are not! You have already lost the battle, for Christ is risen."

"**My kingdom is not of this world,**" Jesus says to Pilate. But Pilate has him crucified anyway. And at the top of the cross he has posted in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin the words: "**The King of the Jews.**"

Jesus' accusers tried to get Pilate to reword that sign, but he wouldn't do it. "**I have written what I have written.**" The last word from a man who thinks he has the last word.

But he doesn't have the last word. The last word belongs to Christ the King, the One who sits on the throne, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

Christ's kingdom is not *of* the world, yet it is very much *in* the world, as loyal subjects such as Bishop Tutu proclaim. It's in the world, growing in secret, ready to burst into bloom. It's a kingdom ruled by One who reigns in glory now but was first enthroned upon a cross. Christ rules a counter-kingdom which, all appearances to the contrary, is the real thing, the truth. "**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever**" (Rev. 11:16).

Today is the Festival of Christ the King. We stand with Pilate today, trying to decide what to do, whom to believe, where the truth lies, which ruler to serve and which to crucify.

What is *our* answer? Who is *our* King? Whom shall *we* serve till kingdom come?

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