

CHRIST REIGNS
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Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-38a

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 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?' 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.' 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.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

In the gospel reading today, Pilate is trying to get to the bottom of the charges that have been brought against Jesus, and he's having a hard time because Jesus won't give him a straight answer. He asks Jesus if the charges are true—if he's going around claiming to be "King of the Jews" undermining the Jewish leadership—but instead of a simple *yes* or *no*, Jesus asks Pilate if he's making this accusation himself or if it's just hearsay.

Frustrated, Pilate says, "Look, I'm not part of this. This is an internal Jewish matter, as far as I'm concerned. But since the chief priest has brought you to me, you're my problem now. So just tell me if you did it or not."

Still, Jesus won't answer the question. He tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not the kind of kingdom you'd understand. It's not a kingdom like Rome. It's not a kingdom that's based on domination. If it were, my followers would be out in the streets right now, swords in hand, fighting to free me."

"Aha!" Pilate says. "So you are a king?" He thinks he finally has Jesus pinned down. But Jesus shrugs him off and continues talking on a completely different level. He and Pilate are having parallel conversations. Pilate is talking about one thing, and Jesus is talking about another. Pilate is trying to determine the truth of these charges, and Jesus is trying to reveal the larger truth that, despite appearances, Pilate is not the one who's in charge here; the high priest is not the one who's in charge here; the whole Roman Empire is not the one who's in charge here; God is the One who's in charge here.

"For this I was born," Jesus says, "and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth"—the truth that God alone is the maker and ruler of the universe; the truth that God alone is "the Alpha and the Omega," as Revelation puts it; the truth that God alone is the One "who is and who was and who is to come."

To which Pilate responds, "What is truth?" And it's really interesting the way he phrases it. He doesn't say, "What is *the* truth?" in a particular sense—like, *Are you going around making this wild claim or not? Tell me the truth.* He says, "What is truth?" in a general sense—like he's questioning the whole concept of truth; like he's saying truth is whatever we want to make it; like he's telling Jesus, "You have your truth, and I have mine."

So we get two very different takes on life in this reading, and the question is, who are we going to believe, Jesus or Pilate? Is God the sovereign Lord of all, the Almighty, or is that just one truth among many? As Christians, we all know Jesus is the right answer. Every kid who's ever sat in Sunday school knows that. But knowing and believing are two different things, and believing in this case is actually pretty complicated—for a couple of reasons.

First of all, believing Jesus over Pilate is complicated because when we look around, we don't actually see much evidence of what Jesus is saying. We don't see much evidence that God is in charge of anything, let alone everything. But we do see a lot of evidence to the contrary. We see people exploiting other people, taking advantage of other people, marginalizing other people. So our own eyes tell us maybe the right answer is actually Pilate. Maybe there really is no divine power over us, only the kingdoms we create.

Second of all, believing Jesus over Pilate is complicated because we live in a world where the idea of truth the way Jesus means it—ultimate truth, Truth with a capital T, truth that's beyond all other truths—is taking a real beating. We live in our own little

realities today, our own little bubbles. *What is truth?* Truth is whatever Facebook's algorithm says it is. Truth is whatever pops up in my carefully curated news feed. If truth was a restaurant today, it would be a Golden Corral—a place where we can pick and choose whatever we're hungry for. So our own lives tell us maybe the right answer is actually Pilate. Maybe truth really is something we can shape and mold to our own liking.

But here's the problem: I don't want to live in a world like that. I don't want to live in a world where Pilate is right and Jesus is wrong. I don't want to live in a world where truth is cheap and we can bend it to suit our own purposes. Because a world like that doesn't hold us accountable to anything outside of ourselves, and it doesn't offer any hope that things will ever change or get better for the weak and the vulnerable.

So how do we resolve these complications?

That's a good question, and I thought about it for a long time this week before it finally hit me: Pilate is right, and that doesn't mean Jesus is wrong; the power of Rome is very real, and that doesn't mean God is not in charge; the world is full of injustice, and that doesn't mean the kingdom Jesus talked about isn't coming.

So I think the key is not looking at Pilate's truth and Jesus' truth from an either/or perspective, but holding on to both of them at once, which isn't easy. It takes a lot of faith and a lot of imagination. We have to have double-vision. We have to look at the center of things and also notice what's happening around the edges. We have to look at the realities of life that are painfully clear and also see the realities that are still coming into focus.

And that's what Christ the King Sunday is about. It's about saying: kingdoms rise, and Christ reigns; the earth turns, and Christ reigns; the center holds, and Christ reigns. Despite appearances, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, Christ reigns. Thanks be to God, Christ reigns! Amen.