

WHAT KIND OF KING IS JESUS?
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Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: 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 18:33-37

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.'

In the gospel reading today, we find Pontius Pilate in a state of utter mystification. A seemingly harmless rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, has been hauled in front of him on the grounds that he's some kind of rival king and a threat to Roman authority.

This makes absolutely no sense to Pilate. In the ancient world, kings were a lot different than the monarchs we have today. Modern kings and queens are mainly figureheads. They serve as

symbols of national identity, and they might have influence over people, but they don't have any real power. There's not much that King Charles, for instance, can actually do. That kind of kingship would've sounded really bizarre to a proper Roman, like Pilate. In his world, being a king meant one thing: having the power to force others to submit to your will. Kings commanded armies, they waged wars, they conquered enemies.

So when Pilate asks Jesus if he's a king, what he's really asking him is: Do you have legions of troops at your disposal? Are you planning some kind of military campaign? Are you going to stage an insurrection? And Jesus clearly knows this is what Pilate's asking because of the way he answers. He says, Look around, do you see my followers taking up arms? Do you see them marching through the streets? Do you see them trying to break me out of prison? No.

But notice something. Notice that Jesus never says he's not a king, and he never says he doesn't have power. He says his kingdom is "not from this world," implying that he is a king, and he does have power, but his power is of a totally different nature than the kind of power Pilate understands.

What, then, is the nature of Jesus' power? What kind of king is he? These are the questions we think about on Christ the King Sunday. And one place we can look for answers is scripture. Another place is tradition. As Christians, we believe Jesus is not merely powerful, he's all-powerful because he's God incarnate. He's the Almighty, as Revelation puts it—the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who has "dominion forever and ever."

But how do we square that with what we see in the reading today? If Jesus is so powerful, why does he allow himself to be arrested? Why does he allow himself to be put on trial? And ultimately why does he allow himself to be crucified?

Well, that's how he accomplished his purpose, you might say. That's how he brought us back into relationship with God—by sacrificing himself. But couldn't an all-powerful being have found a quicker and easier way to do that? Couldn't he

have just snapped his fingers and made us all love God and want to be close to God? Couldn't he have just waved his hand and turned us all into models of goodness and virtue, avoiding all the pain and suffering of the past two thousand years, not to mention his own?

This is one of the mysteries at the heart of Christianity: If God wants to transform us, why doesn't God just do it? If God wants us to change our ways, why doesn't God just make it so? If God wants us to live in peace with God and each other, why doesn't God just cast some sort of spell over us?

I think we all wonder about that from time to time, especially when we look at the state of the world around us. One person who wondered about it was Soren Kierkegaard. He was a 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, and he came up with a pretty good answer that he put in the form of a story. So, listen for God's word to you, as told by Kierkegaard.

Once upon a time, there lived a great king, who ruled over a vast kingdom, where he had absolute power over all his subjects. He could elevate anyone to a life of wealth and privilege, or he could condemn anyone to a life of ruin and despair.

Now, the custom in this kingdom was that every few years, the king would travel around and visit every corner of the land, to make sure everything was running smoothly. It was a great and terrible day when the royal procession would come rumbling through a village. All the houses would be freshly painted, all the shops would be hung with garlands of flowers, and all the villagers would be decked out in their finest clothing, as they stood by the side of the road and bowed when the king went by.

While he was traveling through one village, the king spied a peasant woman through the window of his coach. He told the driver to stop, and he sat there for a moment, frozen. Despite the roughness of her appearance from living a hard life, she was the most noble woman he'd ever laid eyes on, and he knew right then and there he'd found his queen.

The king stepped out of his coach and went to kneel down in front of her, to ask for her hand in marriage. But then he realized it wasn't that simple. No matter how she felt about him, she was certain to accept his proposal, but it wouldn't be out of love. She'd either say yes because he could give her anything she wanted, or she'd say yes because he could take away everything she had.

Either way, the king realized she could never really love him because love can't be coerced. It has to be given freely. So, he got back in his coach and headed back to his castle, saddened by the fact that he could never have the one thing he was missing.

But on the way home, the king had a "eureka" moment, and as soon as reached the castle, he jumped out of his coach and ran up to his chambers. He took off his heavy golden crown, laid aside his finely made sword, removed his ermine robe, and put on some old, tattered rags. Then, later that night, he crept out of the castle and walked barefoot all the way back to the village where he saw the woman. His plan was to knock on the door of her cottage and ask if she could spare a crust of bread, hoping that, stripped of his power and wealth, and coming to her in weakness and humility, she'd be able to see him for who he was and fall in love with him.

And so it is with Christ the King. I suppose he could've just snapped his fingers and forced us to submit to his will, like a proper Roman. But even the power of the Almighty couldn't have made us love him because love can't be coerced. It has to be given freely. Which is why God the Son set aside his power, his glory, his infiniteness, and came to us in weakness and humility—as a helpless baby, as a wandering preacher, as a prisoner in chains: so we could fall in love with him.

"This is the God as he stands upon the earth," Kierkegaard said, "like unto the humblest by the power of his omnipotent love."

So, are you afraid of God—afraid that God will punish you for your sins? Do you hope to gain something from God—to win God's favor in this life or in the life to come? What if God doesn't care about any of that, but only wants your love? How can you open your heart to God? That's what the life of faith is about. It's about opening our hearts to God through prayer, through worship, through giving; by serving our neighbors, by working for justice, by building community—all the things we do here at Valley.

Today and every day, Christ the King is standing on your doorstep, knocking. Why not let him in? Amen.