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Proper 29B: Christ the King – John 18:33-37

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A Different Kind of King

When I was a child, my family lived in Canada. Hanging on the wall of every grade school classroom I attended was a portrait of Queen Elizabeth, dressed in what was to my child's eyes, a beautiful long white gown, a regal blue sash, a substantial diamond necklace, and a jewel encrusted crown. She smiled benignly over our classroom, adding a regal air to our efforts, a touch of Cinderella at the ball to our cinderblock surroundings.

One day at school we received word that her majesty was actually coming to visit the small town where we lived in northern Canada. We could all go out to the little airport to welcome her and see her in person. She was coming with her husband – a prince!—and, even better, her sister – a princess! I guess I had Disney visions in my head as my father took me to the airport to meet the Queen. The plane landed. The staircase was wheeled over to the door of the plane. The door opened, and out stepped . . . a middle aged woman wearing a knee length wool coat, sensible shoes, and a rather plain little hat. There was a man beside her, but he too looked rather ordinary. This couple, who were no more glamorous than my own family members, descended the staircase to the tarmac and were introduced as the Queen and her consort. The princess, it was announced, was ill, and did not make the trip. Not at all what I was expecting.

Today in the Church we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. We make the claim that it is Jesus Christ who reigns, who claims our allegiance. But his reign is a surprising one, his power puzzling, his appearance not what many were expecting. Pilate certainly wasn't. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asks. Pontius Pilate was a cruel man, a governor who actually was eventually removed from his post for being too cruel, too harsh even by Rome's standards. So I imagine he asked it with a sneer as Jesus stood before him. Or maybe Pilate yawned, not even looking up as he sat behind

his marble desk, not even dignifying the one whose life he held in the balance with a glance. You – a king? It didn't match up – this peasant from Galilee. Must be just another rebel, a troublemaker, ultimately a nobody. Pilate knew what kingly power looked like. He worked for it, enforced it. Pilate worked for the most powerful king ever -- Caesar, and his job was to put down any other claimants to the throne. He knew that the only one authorized by Rome to have the title King of the Jews was King Herod. Anyone else who put the title King next to his name must be dealt with accordingly.

But Jesus responds: “My kingdom is not from this world.” Perhaps Pilate is surprised that the prisoner dares to speak. “So you really are a king?” asks Pilate. Jesus answers, “You are the one who keeps saying that I am a king. For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” And then Jesus gives Pilate a chance to enter into his kingdom, to take a step toward a new kind of power. Jesus says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” If you want to be aligned with truth, on the side of truth, a seeker after truth, says Jesus, listen to me. If you want to know truth, which Jesus says will set you free, you need to trust me, my kind of power, my kind of reign. Jesus says, listen to me, let me in. Let me in.

In a book called, *A Dialogue with Hasidic Tales*, there is a short story about where God dwells. Once the rabbi surprised a group of learned men by asking, “Where is the dwelling place of God?” “What a thing to ask!” they laughed at him. “Is not the whole world full of [God's] glory?” But the rabbi said, “God dwells wherever people let him in.” Martin Buber comments about this story, “This is the ultimate purpose: to let God in. But we can let [God] in only where we really stand, where we live, where we live a true life. If we maintain [holy interaction] in the little world entrusted to us, if we help the holy substance to accomplish itself in that section of Creation in which we are living, then we are establishing, in this our place, a dwelling for the Divine Presence.”<sup>1</sup> Where we let God in. Where we let God reign. Where we let God direct and rule our hearts.

When Jesus stands before Pilate, Jesus gives Pilate the chance to let Jesus in. But Pilate doesn't take the risk. Pilate thinks he is in charge. Pilate is the judge; Jesus is the judged. Pilate is the earthly superior; Jesus is the inferior. Jesus stands before Pilate, who had the earthly power and authority to order his death or set him free. Pilate likes this arrangement and it lets him keep Jesus at arm's length. Pilate would not take the risk to listen to the truth, even though it was standing right in front of him. And in the

end, Pilate cared more for himself than for the truth. Pilate did not take the risk that there is a deeper reality, a more important and powerful kingdom than he could see, a kingdom not from the world, but a kingdom at work in the world, even here and now among us.

John Mansfield, in his play "The Trial of Jesus," pictures Pilate's wife remaining in the judgment hall long after everybody else has left. A soldier who has taken part in the crucifixion comes in, and she asks him, "Is he dead yet?" The soldier shakes his head and says, "No, lady, he is not dead." She questions him further, "But surely he is dead, he has been hanging there so long now." And the soldier replies, "No, lady, he is not dead. His love is let loose in the world now, and neither Jew nor Roman can stop him."<sup>iii</sup>

To let Jesus reign in our hearts, to let him have rule over our lives, is to stand with the power of God, the power for good, the power of love. But it will look, very often, like weakness and vulnerability. It will not make sense to Pilate, or to anyone who trusts outward appearances only, who will go with the power he knows, rather than a power he must take a risk and trust, who is fearful that he has too much to lose, even to discover a truth that would set him free. Choosing Christ as King means that we will do things that may look foolish but are worth doing because they are right and true and trustworthy.

There is a poem, said to be important to Mother Teresa and written on the wall of the home she founded for children in Calcutta. Part of it goes like this:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.  
Be kind anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.  
Create anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.  
Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.<sup>iii</sup>

Pilate looked so powerful. But soon after his death, he would even be pretty much forgotten, except that he had an encounter with the true and

lasting king. The Pilates of this world pass away, and most will be forgotten. The reign of Jesus Christ is forever and ever.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> In H. King Oehmig, "Postscript," *Synthesis*, November 20, 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> In a sermon by The Rev. Dr. Wiley Stevens, on Day 1 Radio, November 23, 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Another version, maybe the original, is credited to Kent M. Keith, written in 1968. You can find both versions as [http://www.prayerfoundation.org/mother\\_teresa\\_do\\_it\\_anyway.htm](http://www.prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm).