

## [John 18:33-37](#)

I feel sorry for Pontius Pilate. This was the man who should be in charge – well, on behalf of the Roman Emperor, of course. But he doesn't know what to do with Jesus, this supposed King of the Jews. Pilate should be decisive, he should be acting powerfully, but he isn't.

Why? He's a lame duck ruler. We've sometimes seen lame duck Prime Ministers in the UK when the ruling party has lost its majority in the House of Commons and no other party will enter into an arrangement or a coalition with them. And we've seen lame duck American Presidents when their party has lost its majority in both Houses of their elected representatives.

Pilate is at the mercy of the Jewish leaders. They might be speaking as if they are soliciting a favour or pleading with him, but they have him round their little finger. For a few years previously, Pilate had sent Roman soldiers into the Temple in Jerusalem, where some of their acts had scandalised Jewish religious sensibilities. The Jewish leaders had sent a deputation to Rome to protest, knowing this kind of unnecessarily offensive behaviour was against Imperial policy. As a result, Pilate was on a final warning from Rome. One more mis-step and he would be exiled.

So we have this dreadful, ironic situation before us. Pilate, the man who has all the human power and authority, is weak. The Jewish leaders, who should have been kept in check by a better political operator, can play the system. And the One who looks weakest of all is the One hailed as King.

### **King of the Jews**

<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

It's a Jewish title being applied to Jesus. Never in the New Testament is Jesus called 'Emperor' in contrast to Caesar. No: when the Gospel gets thoroughly into the Graeco-Roman cultures the title the early church appropriates for him there is not 'Emperor' but 'Lord', corresponding with the divine claim that Roman Emperors made for themselves. That was used to claim not merely Jesus' right to reign and rule, but his divine status. He is more than an Emperor.

But 'King of the Jews' – now that's a problem. The Jewish nation had longed to have a king again since losing their monarchy at the Exile in the sixth century

BC. And it was a threat to Rome, because of Jewish aspirations to have a leader who would topple the occupying Roman forces. Jesus could be a threat to Pilate, even if previous pretenders had usually been summarily arrested and executed.

Pilate would not be alone in finding the title 'King of the Jews' problematic. It was an issue for the Jewish leaders, too. It had become clear that Jesus didn't conform to their ideals and not only that, he was fiercely critical of them. Whichever group of Jews they belonged to, Jesus had a largely unfavourable critique of them.

So if you were a teacher of the law but taught it rigorously without factoring in love for God and love for neighbour, Jesus had something to say to you. If you were a Pharisee with a passion for faithful, orthodox religion but had held that in such a way that you had become harsh and judgmental, Jesus would point that out. And if you were a Sadducee, believing as little as possible and all the while being in cahoots with the occupying forces who gave you a privileged position in society, then Jesus wasn't going to be your biggest fan.

And none of this is merely interesting historical detail, because there are similarities and parallels in our lives today. If Jesus is King, then we need to look at our lives and attitudes.

For he threatens to topple our personal authority and autonomy. We think we have the right to run our own lives. In the title of a popular play many years ago, we ask, 'Whose life is it anyway?' Or we sing along with Billy Joel, 'Keep it to yourself, it's my life.'

But Jesus says no, it's not your life, you were bought with a price. You belong to me. I am king. We have some re-ordering to do.

Or we apply our faith in Jesus harshly, looking down on others, casting aspersions on them, acting as if only they are the ones who have things to put right in their lives, because we hold to the true and pure faith. But many a passionate Christian has turned into a Pharisee over the centuries, and it's still happening.

And others of us would rather hob-nob with the powerful of our society, feathering our nests and hoping that some of their glory brushes off on us. But Jesus the King will tell us that this is a highly disordered way to live, and will

call us to account, not least when our attraction to power is bad news for the poor.

### **My kingdom is not of this world**

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.'

Well, maybe here is where we're let off the hook? If Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, if it's other-worldly and all about heaven, then perhaps we won't be too challenged by it after all?

And for all their strictness, that's the sort of line that cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses take. Because Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, we should not get involved in the things of this world, such as politics or economics. We can avoid getting messy with them.

And some Christians construe a version of faith that is a little bit like that, where Jesus is interested in their private, personal morality, but not about the rest of life. His kingdom is not of this world.

Except – there's a problem. It would be better to translate these words 'My kingdom is not *from* this world.' You can see the intent from the rest of the verse, where Jesus says, 'But now my kingdom is *from* another place.'

So it's not about the limitations of the kingdom, it's about where the kingdom originates from. The kingdom over which Jesus rules originates from heaven. It originates from the One who is the Creator of all things. And therefore, when Jesus says his kingdom is not from this world, he is distinguishing it from earthly kingdoms and empires, but not by limiting it. In fact, he's expanding its reach.

If Jesus is King, then, he's going to affect my personal morality, but he's also going to affect my politics, my economics, my working life, and everything else. Many years ago, the late John Stott said that you can't have Jesus as Saviour without having him as Lord, and if he isn't Lord *of* all then he isn't Lord *at* all.

As Christians we are recognising Jesus as King now, before the great day when every knee shall bow at his name and every tongue confess him as Lord<sup>1</sup>. We live in the knowledge that he is reigning now, before the day when all his enemies, death included, will be put under his feet, and there is no longer any rebellion or contesting of his rightful place.

We recognise Jesus as King now, because he is reigning already. That's what the passage from [Daniel 7:9-14](#) is about. When the one like a son of man (which in New Testament terms we understand to be Jesus) comes on the clouds of heaven it is not him returning to earth in glory in the Second Coming, for we read that at that time he comes to 'The Ancient of Days' – that is, Almighty God, and reigns there. This is a passage that foretells the implications of the Ascension.

At present, people ignore, disregard, oppose, or reject the reign of Jesus as King over all. But we know that day is coming, so as Christians we live as subjects of the King now. And in doing so, we witness to the world about what is coming.

The great twentieth century church leader Lesslie Newbigin once said that the local church is what he called 'The hermeneutic of the Gospel.' Now that may be high-falutin' theological jargon to you, but the word 'hermeneutic' simply means 'interpretation'. In other words, then, the way the local church lives interprets the Gospel to the people around it in society. If people want to know what the Christian message is, it's not simply that we should be able to tell them what it means in our lives, they should be able to see what it's like to live under the reign of Christ from the way we live.

I wonder how the local community looks at our church. Does it see a colony of Christ's kingdom, living by what he says? Or does it see something else?

### **The Feast of Christ the King**

And that is really what this Sunday is all about. I am reluctant to call it 'The Last Sunday Before Advent', with rather sounds to me like everything is petering out but don't worry, everything will get going again next week.

I would rather call it by its positive title, 'The Feast of Christ the King.' This is where we have been heading for all of the church year since we began last Advent. We anticipated the coming of Christ and celebrated it. We marked his life and ministry, his death, resurrection, and ascension. Then we recalled the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and the mission of God in which the Spirit-empowered church shares.

All this leads up to today. We are looking to the great day when Jesus reigns without any opposition, unlike now.

Therefore, it's the *climax* of the Christian Year. This is where we're heading.  
This is where history is heading.

Our calling is to live more faithfully like that future is here already, and to do so  
as a witness before the watching world.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:10-11