

“A Kingdom Not from Here”
John 18:33-38a; II Samuel 23:1-5
Christ the King Sunday

II Samuel 23:1-5

¹Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

²The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.

³The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me:

One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
⁴is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain
on the grassy land.

⁵Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.
Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

John 18:33-37

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I?”

Your own people—and the chief priests!—have handed *you* over to *me*. What have *you* done?”

³⁶Jesus 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.”

³⁷Pilate 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.”

³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

The Sermon

On this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, it seems like a good time to consider:

What does it mean to you that Jesus is king?

What does it mean to you that Jesus is *your* king?

In 1066, William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings, and the Normans, from France, took over England, subjugating the Anglo-Saxons who had been established there for centuries.

Twenty years later, William sent an army of investigators all over the country to determine just how much property he now controlled—not just the quantity of land, but the buildings and property on it, all the way down to how many heads of cattle each person owned. It was all tallied up in a 900-page book which came to be called The Domesday Book [spelled “Domesday” but pronounced—and meaning—“Doomsday”].

The English historical writer Robert Lacey has said it was essentially a ‘corporate takeover.’ He said,

[The Normans] became the new managers and controllers of the two million or so Anglo-Saxons and Danes who inhabited England. Modern managers take over a company’s accounting system. The Normans took over the land—and now William wanted to know ‘what or how much everyone in England had.’

The result of this countrywide investigation was the Domesday Book, so nicknamed by the native English as a sort of put-down, a resentful joke. William’s great survey invaded everyone’s lives, winking out their secrets, they complained. Like God’s Day of Judgement, it left people helpless in the face of such total knowledge, with no hope of appeal.

The book [described] more than thirteen thousand places in England and some parts of Wales, all examined in the most extraordinary detail. [A contemporary report said that] ‘...not a yard of land, nor indeed one ox nor one cow nor one pig was left out.’ⁱ

The monks who recorded that observation in 1087, says Robert Lacey,

understood the bottom line. Domesday was all about control and money. As far back as anyone could remember, the Anglo-Saxons had held and farmed their land in a variety of ways. But now nobody owned land without obligations to the King: they held it as William’s tenant, and had to pay for the privilege with ‘service,’ which could

take the form of a basket of eggs, some chickens, bacon, honey, a barrel of herrings, money, or supplying armed soldiers when the King called for war.ⁱⁱ

There's a saying that I first heard in England as a critique of the government, which was,

“They know the *cost* of everything,
and don't know the *value* of anything.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What is the meaning of someone being your king?

For the Anglo-Saxons, as for so many millions throughout history, the meaning of someone being their king was that someone had become entitled—and could back up that entitlement with military force—to know everything about you, including everything you *have*, in every sense, down to the smallest detail, leaving you with no recourse, no sense that you are your own, free self with a destiny of your own;

someone for whom your only value is what your *possessions* are worth, and each one of those possessions is tallied up and filed away, to be taken from you or used against you for the benefit of an overlord who couldn't possibly care less about you or your family's welfare, only about the welfare of your stuff, which they don't really regard as yours anymore anyway.

In Jesus' time, there was, in Northern Israel, a coastal city, which is now being excavated, called Caesarea Maritima.^{iv}

In 1961, archaeologists uncovered there a limestone block, hidden for nearly 2,000 years, into which had been chiseled, in Roman times, an inscription mentioning the highest-ranking government official of the Roman province of Judea: namely, Pontius Pilate.^v

That limestone block is now the earliest confirmation, outside of the gospels, of the existence of Pontius Pilate.

And it's interesting that it puts Pilate in the city of Caesarea Maritima, because Caesarea Maritima, a "major, Roman-style, seaport city,"^{vi} had been built by none other than King Herod, known to history as Herod the Great,

the same Herod who, according to Matthew, in his fear and desperation to hold onto power, had ordered the murder of every child two years old and younger in and around Bethlehem—as depraved and unconscionable an act as you can imagine, but for someone trying to cling to power, money and security, just something that, in their distorted mind, has to be done.

About a generation before Jesus, the Roman senate, very comfortable working with Herod, had bestowed upon him a new, official title: "King of the Jews."^{vii}

So the Roman occupiers had formally named Herod "King of the Jews," and Herod had built Caesarea Maritima, and Pilate was a Roman official in Caesarea Maritima, the city that Herod had built.

What did it mean to Pilate for someone to be called the King of the Jews?

Pilate knew that Herod had amassed a fortune by being closely associated with the Romans. Being a king meant doing whatever you had to do, including murdering children and selling out your own, already-downtrodden people in order to hold onto power.

It meant a fondness for extravagant building projects, including Caesarea Maritima and even a program to enhance the Temple in Jerusalem, paid for by money that was procured at the cost of one's soul.

And he knew that Herod had been a smooth operator who had used his Jewish and Roman connections and could manipulate them against each

other to hold onto his own power and expand it so that he would never have to be afraid of either the occupying Romans or his own, restless, occupied Jewish people.

That's what Pilate knew of the last person to have been designated "King of the Jews"—a designation that had actually been made official by the Romans, not by the Jews they dominated.

Kingship had always been a tricky concept for the People of God.

A thousand years earlier, when the prophet Samuel was very old, all the elders of Israel came to him and said, "You're old, and your sons do not follow in your ways. So, before you go tottering off into antiquity,^{viii} we want you to appoint us a king, just like all the other nations have."

And Samuel said, all right, listen: if you get a king to reign over you, here's what's going to happen:

He'll take your sons and put them in the army, in the front lines,
and he'll take them by the thousands.

He'll take people to plow his ground and to reap his harvest,
to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots.

He'll take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

He'll take the best of your fields and your vineyards
and your olive orchards,
and he'll give them to his own lackeys.

He'll take a tenth of your grain and your vineyards
and give it to his officers and social climbers.

He'll take your male and female slaves—
and again, as always, it has to be pointed out, slavery was a
wretched, unfree life, but it didn't have the same genocidal cruelty
that was part of American slavery.

But he'll take your slaves, and the best of your cattle and your donkeys,
and he'll put them all to work for himself.

He'll take a tenth of your flocks, and *you* will be his slaves.

And in that day, you will cry out
because of this king you've chosen for yourselves;
but the LORD will give you no answer.^{ix}

But the people thought, "Yeah, right, whatever," and they wound up with King Saul, and everything Samuel had warned them about came to pass.

So how loaded was the question, for Jesus and for Pilate, when Pilate entered the headquarters, called for Jesus, and asked him, point blank:

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

And as is so often the case in John's gospel, as it is whenever we try to interrogate God, Jesus might as well have said, "You and I speak two different languages."

But the way he said it was, "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.

"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." Which sounds to me like he is saying, "That's your language, but when I talk about my quote-
"kingdom," I am talking about something you can probably not even imagine.

He said, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world: *to testify to the truth.*"

That's my kingship. Not earthly power. Not massive building projects. Not running over children and ransacking populations and backing it up with military might.

And here is what my kingdom looks like:

“Everyone who belongs to the *truth* listens to my voice.”

And Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

What does it mean to you that Jesus is king?

What does it mean to you that Jesus is *your* king?

Two people died this past week—one very young, the other after an unusually long life—whose lives and whose passing draw me back to King Jesus. I need to hear his voice; I need to belong to a truth that is truer and larger and vaster than the limited and bendable truths I see around me.

One of those people was a 13-year-old girl in Milwaukee named Sandra Parks. Two years ago, when she was an 11-year-old in 6th grade, she wrote a composition called “Our Truth” that won Third Place in an essay contest.

In part, it said, “In the city in which I live, I hear and see examples of chaos almost everyday [sic]. Little children are victims of senseless gun violence.”

Further down, it said, “Our first truth is that we must start caring about each other. We need to be empathetic and try to walk in each other's shoes... We shall overcome, when we love ourselves and the people around us. Then, we become our brother's keeper.”

“Our second truth is that we need to have purpose. We are the future generation, therefore we must have an education to make a positive difference in the world... We will overcome when we use our education to make the world a better place.”

This past Monday night, Sandra Parks, now a 13-year-old 8th-grader, was home watching TV when a stray bullet fired from outside her home burst through her bedroom wall and killed her.^x The gunfire had nothing to do with her or her family.

The other was 103 and just died a couple of days ago. Her name was Olivia Hooker. In May, 1921, she was a 6-year-old living in an affluent African American area outside Tulsa, Oklahoma called Greenwood when a white mob came into their part of town to murder and destroy.

She and her three siblings were home when they saw men come into their back yard carrying torches. Her mother hid them under a table. They stayed silent and hidden as the men came in and “took an axe to the family piano”^{xi} and tore up her dolls’ clothes.

She once told NPR, “I guess the most shocking thing was seeing people to whom you had never done anything to irritate, who just took it upon themselves to destroy your property because they didn’t want you to have those things, and they were teaching you a lesson.”

Outside, that once affluent enclave was a burning ruin, and as many as 300 people were murdered.

What was Herod so afraid of that he had to murder children to hold onto his power?

Olivia Hooker eventually became the first African-American woman to join the US Coast Guard, the head of which called her a “national treasure.”

She earned a teaching degree from Ohio State; a masters from Columbia University, and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Rochester. She became a professor at Fordham in New York City. At 95, she became a volunteer with the Coast Guard Auxiliary. This past Wednesday, she died quietly at home in White Plains, New York, at 103.

Not long ago she was asked what kept her going, and she said: “It’s not about you, or me. It’s about what we can give to this world.”^{xii}

Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Love one another just as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

What does it mean to you that Jesus is king?

What does it mean to you that Jesus is your king?

My king does not need to requisition all my worldly goods, because by showing me who he is and inviting me to follow along, I would already give him everything.

My ruler does not have to destroy people to hold onto greater and greater power; he allowed himself to be destroyed so that all of us could be saved.

My sovereign doesn't send my children off to fight wars for the sake of gaining a little more territory; he teaches his people to live together in peace and treat one another's welfare as just as important as their own.

This is what it means to be faithful subjects in the kingdom of the King of Love.

We'll start all over again next week, trying yet again, as we do every year—knowing that specifically *because* he is our sovereign, we will once again get yet another chance to keep trying to do it better.

In the meantime, “It’s not about you, or me. It’s about what we can give to this world.”

Keith Grogg
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 November 25, 2018

ⁱ Robert Lacey, *Great Tales from English History* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2003), 105-106.

ⁱⁱ Lacey, *Great Tales*, 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ I know, I know: the actual saying is much pithier and more mellifluous: “They know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.” The phrasing of the latter point can get lost on American ears; the syntax makes it sound like a Buddhist koan to say one “knows the value of nothing”—it makes it sound like a positive statement, robbing it of its caustic intent and obscuring the point.

^{iv} As a participant in a Macedonian Ministry trip to Israel/Palestine in April 2016, I was issued an excellent resource which sparks my memory now: *You Will Be My Witnesses: A Macedonian Ministry Resource for the Holy Land* (Atlanta: Macedonian Ministry, 2016), specifically the “Travel Guide” section: J. Maxwell Miller, *A Brief Guide to the Holy Land for Pilgrims*, © 2010 J. Maxwell Miller.

^v “Judea was ordinarily ruled by Roman ‘procurators,’ from A.D. 6 to 66. The public career of Jesus took place during the term of Pontius Pilate as procurator, 26-36.” Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 34.

^{vi} Miller, *Travel Guide*, 17.

^{vii} Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews, or The History of the Destruction of Jerusalem*, Book I, chapter 14, paragraph 4 (<http://earlyjewishwritings.com/text/josephus/war1.html>)

^{viii} Peter O’Toole used this phrase in a charmingly self-deprecating way in his acceptance speech for the 2003 Lifetime Achievement Award at the Academy Awards.

^{ix} I Samuel 8:4-18

^x Faith Karimi, 'Mama, I'm shot': Girl who wrote essay about gun violence is killed by stray bullet in Milwaukee. By Faith Karimi, CNN. Updated 1:40 AM ET, Fri November 23, 2018.

^{xi} "Olivia Hooker Tulsa race riot survivor dies aged 103" (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46332474>, November 24, 2018).

^{xii} BBC, "Olivia Hooker"