

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**"What Is Truth?"**  
**John 18:33-38a**  
**Christ the King Sunday**  
**November 24, 2018**

**"What is truth?"** Pilate asks Jesus.

It's a poignant question between two powerful people with very different images of power.

It's the last words spoken before Pilate has Jesus whipped and a crown of thorns smashed down on his head.

There's no answer waited for and no answer given...

Just a question... left hanging in the early morning air in the hours leading up to Jesus' crucifixion.

**What is truth?**

And as ancient of a moment as this is, this question, from one of the political leaders of the day... sure has a modern ring to it, doesn't it?

In our world of post truth... and optional facts... it's the kind of scene you might expect to hear about on the news today. One politically powerful man looking at his political prisoner, defeated and beaten...

And with a smirk on his face and all the confidence that violence offers him, he offers another rhetorical jab, **"What is truth?"**

And walks out of the room.

It's pretty clear how Pilate sees it. Truth is what power says is true.

Truth is the winners, the ones that get to write the history books.

Truth is the one holding all the cards...

and in this moment that is Pilate, not Jesus,  
truth is Rome, the Empire... not the Kingdom of God.

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It's a striking scene the lectionary gives us for Christ the King Sunday. Just to remind you, this is the last Sunday in the liturgical calendar year. The church's worshiping calendar is kind of strange that way. It doesn't start in January and end in December. Every year starts with Advent... with waiting for the coming of Christ.

And then, for about 6 months it moves us through the story of Christ... the story of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension... and that first half ends with Pentecost.

**And the second half of the year, known as ordinary time, we are ordering our lives in response to the story of Christ... It's the season of growth... marked by the color green, sometimes thought of as the season of the church.**

Together these seasons order a whole year of worshipping,

but they also point to something about the eternal nature of time,  
and the great sacred story of our world.

So, for about 6 months now, we've been in this season of growth... and this week... that whole year comes to its culmination on Christ the King Sunday...

Christ the King Sunday is about the culmination of time and history. It's about the culmination of the Church's story and creation's story... and the world's story... and yes... even all the political stories... and all our individual stories.

Together they are leading us to the time when all will know,  
and live, and love in the great redeeming truth, that **Christ is King.**

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Or so we're told...

But then again, here Jesus is, beaten and defeated. Pilate doesn't even claim to be a king. He's just a governor, after all. But he sure looks a lot more kingly than Jesus.

Pilate starts interrogating Jesus... trying to figure out why the people have bound him up and brought Jesus to him.

"Are you claiming to be the king?" Pilate asks.

"My kingdom is not of this world..." Jesus says.

It's a confusing line for us. "My kingdom is not of this world." We often hear this wrong... and in part that's because we imagine the Kingdom of God as some distant, spiritualized place, separate from this world.

So, when Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, it's easy to think Jesus is saying, "Well, I'll be a king when I get back to heaven."

But that's not what Jesus means at all... Remember the prayer Jesus taught the disciples to pray. "May your kingdom come, your will be done... on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus equates the Kingdom of God with the will of God... and in this prayer he joins together our ideas about earth and heaven. The two become one.

It's the same mystery that is expressed in Jesus' birth... in the incarnation. In Jesus the divine and the human become one. In other words, the realm of God and the realm of humanity are joined together, heaven and earth intertwined.

**And this is what Jesus' life and ministry are all about... the joining of material reality and immaterial reality... Jesus brings together time with eternity.**

**Everything Jesus does, says, and embodies is about the joining together... of heaven and earth. The two... become one... reality.**

**It is the embodiment of God's will, God's kingdom... in our very physical lives.**

"My kingdom is not of this world..." isn't Jesus' way of saying, "Oh well, when I die I'll be king in another place..." Not at all.

It's Jesus' way of saying, "My kingdom... is not the kind of kingdom you're used to. It's not a kingdom propped up by military might and economic superpowers. It's not a kingdom of political maneuvering for power and control."

It's a kingdom of another kind of power... than you are used to imagining and trusting in. It's one where time and eternity become intertwined.

It's a kingdom where the servants and the slaves... are recognized as the greatest.  
It's a kingdom where child-like wonder creates the guiding policies,  
rather than rigid ideologies.  
It's a kingdom where the first in line... are found to be no more ahead than the last in line.  
It's a kingdom with very surprising boundaries...  
Where those who everyone thinks are in, are actually out,  
And those who everyone thinks are out, are actually in.

It's a kingdom where the wolf and the lamb lie down together.  
where forgiveness and grace turn over the tables of guilt and shame.

***Jesus' kingdom is wherever, and whenever the will and ways of God are being enacted. [repeat]***

***Jesus' kingdom is not simply some far-off place,  
or some far off time.***

The Kingdom of God is in every pocket of this world where heaven is already being created on earth,  
where the divine and human are recognized as one.  
where we live and act in a way that recognizes immaterial reality is already mingling with material reality... where we learn to recognize the sacred divine goodness in all of life.

That changes things. What might happen if we recognized the divine presence... the Holy One,  
... in the life of the illegal immigrant, and the life of the coal miner,  
... in the life of rural Missouri farmers, and the life of the queer college kid...  
... in the life of animals and people, of the sea and sky,  
... in the life of the earth and the life of humanity,  
...in the life of our friends, and the life of our enemies.

***When we recognize the intertwining of the divine in all things... and begin to live as if that is true... God's kingdom has come, and God's will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.***

That's what Jesus means when he says, "my kingdom is not of this world..." He doesn't mean that his kingdom will come in another time or place. Not at all!  
His kingdom is in this time and this place... right here, right now.

But it is not the kind of kingdom our world is used to imagining.  
It takes an altogether different kind of imagination to see it...  
and to recognize it... and to live in it.

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"For this I was born." Jesus says to Pilate. "And for this I came into the world: to testify to this truth."

This is the whole point of Jesus' life, and ministry, and teachings. The Gospel of Mark sums up Jesus' entire ministry by saying that Jesus came to proclaim, "The Kingdom of God is at hand, now! So, repent. Do a 180. Believe the good news, that this is true now!" (Mark 1:15)

Jesus came...to help us recognize a different kind of kingdom than the ones we tend to live by, to stretch our imaginations enough to begin to see the world as God sees it.... to see the world as full of God's life... and to believe it enough, so as to begin to live and act that way.

"For this I was born." Jesus says to Pilate. "And for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth."

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Pilate... sees this Palestinian peasant...  
with a black eye, bound in tattered clothing,  
spat upon and beaten,  
and he isn't buying it.

"What is truth?" Pilate asks... as he walks away... to face the demanding mob outside his window.

And throughout Christian history... these last 2,000 years, much of church has been asking the same question.

We have sung, and confessed Christ is King,  
but we often haven't acted as if Christ was telling the truth.

For so much of Christian history, the church has pushed Jesus' kingdom to some far-off time and place so that we didn't have to deal with it now. We pray the Lord's Prayer... then walk out the door like Pilate... to face the quote "real world."

And as much as using the power of Pilate and Rome has seemed prudent, it always seems to end up with more death and destruction.

Rachel Held Evens writes about a series of examples of these moments in her book "Searching for Sunday."<sup>1</sup> I want to read them to you to help us reconnect with our own history. At the end of each one I'm going to ask Pilate's question: "What Is Truth?"

And as we remember that the Crucified One is our King, I want to invite you to respond with "Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy."

Let's practice that now.

"What Is Truth?"

"Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy."

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Three hundred years after Jesus died on a **Roman cross**, the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians, who had once been persecuted by the empire, *became* the empire, and those who had once denied the sword took up the sword against their neighbors. Pagan temples were destroyed, their patrons forced to convert to Christianity or die.

Christians whose ancestors had been martyred in gladiatorial combat now attended the games, cheering on the bloodshed.

What Is Truth?

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<sup>1</sup> The following is adapted from Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 74-79.

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

On July 15, 1099, Christian crusaders lay siege to Jerusalem, then occupied by Fatimite Arabs. They found a breach in the wall and took the city.

Declaring “God wills it!” they killed every defender in their path and dashed the bodies of helpless babies against rocks. When they came upon a synagogue where many of the city’s Jews had taken refuge, they set fire to the building and burned the people inside alive.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

Through a series of centuries-long inquisitions that swept across Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, hundreds of thousands of people, many of them women accused of witchcraft, were tortured by “Christian leaders” charged with protecting the church from heresy. Their instruments of torture, designed to slowly inflict pain by dismembering and dislocating the body, earned nicknames like the Breast Ripper, the Head Crusher, and Judas Chair. Many were inscribed with the phrase *Soli Deo Gloria*, “Glory be only to God.”

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

In a book entitled *On Jews and Their Lies*, reformer Martin Luther encouraged civic leaders to burn down Jewish synagogues, expel the Jewish people from their lands, and murder those who continued to practice their faith within Christian territory. “The ruler must act like a good physician, who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, and burn flesh, veins, bone, and marrow,” he wrote. Luther’s writings were later used by German officials as religious justification of the Holocaust.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

Likening their conquests of the New World, the Americas, to Joshua’s defeat of Canaan, European Christians... brought rape, violence, plunder, and enslavement to the New World, where hundreds of thousands of native people were enslaved or killed.

It is said that a tribal chief was given the chance to convert to Christianity before being executed, but he responded that if heaven was where Christians went when they died, he would rather go to hell.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

In 1838, the United States government, under the leadership of Andrew Jackson, forcibly removed more than sixteen thousand Cherokee people from their homes in Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, and Georgia and relocated them to what is today Oklahoma. Thousands of Cherokee died of cold, hunger, and exhaustion on the journey West—on what is now known as the Trail of Tears—and even more perished as a result of their relocation.

But in his farewell address, President Andrew Jackson declared, “*Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number and has chosen you as guardians of freedom... May He who holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed.*”

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

In the years preceding the Civil War in America, Christian ministers wrote nearly half of all defenses of slavery... In fact, the issue of slavery split the Methodist and the Baptist denomination in half.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

With Martin Luther King Jr. sitting in a Birmingham jail, the newspaper printed the bold headline, "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations." It was the Saturday before Easter; the same day Jesus lay buried in the grave.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

In 2013 Uganda's parliament passed a bill criminalizing homosexuality with the sentence of life imprisonment. The lawmaker behind the bill told the media, "Because we are a God-fearing nation, we value life in a holistic way. It is because of those values that members of parliament passed this bill..."

The legislation is said to have been influenced...

by Christian missionaries to Africa.

What Is Truth?

***Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.***

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The Church has so often followed Pilate out the door and chosen the ways of Rome, rather than the ways of Christ because they seemed expedient.

**But all along there have been those willing to stand with the beaten Palestinian peasant and proclaim that Christ is King, not just with their words, but by following his way...**

**by trusting that Christ's kingdom comes on earth... whenever we have imaginations and hopes large enough to embody it.**

These outrageous followers of Jesus that have shown the world countless times what is true... and challenge us to recognize that the story of resurrection, and redemption, and reconciliation will always be truer than the story of Empires and control.

And I want to share with you some of their stories as well.

As I do, I'll end each one by saying, "This is truth."

And I want to invite you to respond, "Christ is King."

Let's try that now.

"This is truth."

"Christ is King."

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In **the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Pastor and Bishop Ambrose** defied the Roman Empire by blocking the door of his church until Emperor Theodosius had repented of his violence.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In **the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, desert fathers and** mothers fled the violence and the materialism of the empire... and have inspired generations of Christians to live more simply and deliberately.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **14<sup>th</sup> century, John Huss** spoke out against the church's sale of indulgences, and protested the Crusades. He was burned at the stake for obeying his conscious.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **16<sup>th</sup> century, Teresa of Avila** overcame opposition from the aristocracy and male dominated church to advance sweeping monastic reforms and renew the spiritual life of the church.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **17<sup>th</sup> century, the Puritan, Anne Hutchinson** knew it was illegal for her and other women to teach from the Bible in the Massachusetts Bay Colony but did it anyway.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **18<sup>th</sup> century, William Wilberforce** channeled his evangelical fervor into abolishing slavery in the British Empire, vowing "never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name."

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **19<sup>th</sup> century a black woman named Sojourner Truth** proclaimed her own humanity in a culture that did not recognize it... and became a great preacher and Christian leader.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a **Franciscan friar, Maximillian Kolbe**, volunteered to die in the place of a Jewish stranger at Auschwitz.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

In the **60s, black and white pastors** linked arms with Martin Luther King Jr. and marched on Washington.

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

**Rosa Parks** defied the unjust laws of her country and kept her seat, because

This is truth.

**Christ is King.**

**So many men and women**, known and unknown, did the right thing even when it was hard, because...

This is truth:

**Christ is King!**

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You see,

"[Our highest calling]... from year to year,

From month to month,

From hour to hour –

[is] to combine earth and heaven,  
time and eternity,  
[spirit and matter,  
even in the most common actions of our daily lives.]

[This is the work we can do right here, right now,  
in how we view and treat one another,  
and everything around us.]

Right now,  
right here,  
the conjoining of heaven and earth.”<sup>2</sup>

**This is the work of love...**  
**in which the true beauty of the soul proclaims, *Christ is King!***

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> A. J. Scott, adapted from John Philip Newell's dissertation on Scott, 288, 143. Quoted in Newell's lecture, Iona, May 2018.