

King of Kings? Where and When

He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords—forever and ever. Halleluiah, Halleluiah, Halleluiah. This is from what is probably the most well known portion of Handel's Messiah: the Halleluiah Chorus. Whenever I think of Christ the King Sunday, I almost always pull up my MP3 of the chorus and let it play while I work toward preparing for the service; the service which celebrates Christ's kingship. Unlike most of the dates given special recognition on the church calendar this was not one of the original holy feast days. In fact, observance of this did not begin until 1925 when Pope Pius XI instituted it. He did this because he felt that the followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world. The Pope felt Christians were choosing to live in the "kingdom" of the world rather than in the reign of God. In other words, the lives of those proclaiming Christ did not look different from those who did not claim to be Christian. This was not really a new problem; and it is not an issue which has gone away. When we proclaim Christ, we most often do it as our Savior, not as our King. For many, especially those of us who live within societies not governed by kings or having a tradition which honors kings, kingship is framed in terms which perplex and confound us. For some, the language itself creates a stumbling block to seeing God. The adjectives used about kingship bring images which are not comfortable for them: male, dominating, subjugating, hierarchical. These are not images viewed favorably in our postmodern, "#metoo", pluralistic and independent minded culture. My son liked a scene from a movie called "Monty Python and the Holy Grail". That dialogue from the movie seems to express our relationship to this issue: "I am your king"; "Well, I didn't vote for you." "You don't vote for kings." This dialogue questions the authority of the speaker King Author. Today, we question the whole idea of kingship, of any authority over us; especially any authority to which we have not agreed. When we speak of Christ's kingship, how do we understand such authority as it applies to us and how we live? How do we frame the ideas of obedience, of fear of the Lord, of the reign of God, or the King of kings? In our cultural environment of anti-institutionalism and the constant spinning of conspiracy theories, how do we understand the kingship of Christ, especially as applying here and now? Those of us who worship Jesus Christ place ourselves in his service and seek to follow him begin with the recognition that we are not to lord it over others. We are called to a witness which is counter to the prevailing and perennial example of worldly leaders who abuse the power of their positions. Jesus, our teacher and master, washes feet. He tells us to do likewise. If the Spirit of the Lord speaks through us then our words and acts reflect the God who calls us. To rule justly is to fear God and no other. Christ the King Sunday is a time to reflect on just what type of king Christ is; to consider how his description of his rule affects the way we live now; not how things will be when Christ comes again. As we prepare to enter Advent next week, we reflect on two images of Jesus Christ. Next week we begin preparations to celebrate Christ's advent into the world not as a king but as an infant born into poverty to a couple living under Roman oppression. As the echoes of Handel's Halleluiah chorus fades we sing songs with titles like "Poor little Mary's boy". These images clash. One is big and powerful, the other small and poor. Although when we use the ancient Apostles' Creed to affirm our faith we acknowledge the entire scope of the narrative from Mary and Pontius Pilate to the

ascension to reigning with God the Father. The creed relates the journey from powerless vulnerability to exalted power. In the passage from John's gospel before us this morning this "king of the Jews" stands before the worldly king's representative, Pontius Pilate, bound. In Pilate rests the power to condemn to death or to release to freedom. Our text begins with Pilate's question: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate wants and really needs to know the answer to this question because the term "king" is a political one. And Pilate is a political person, representing a political system, the Roman Empire. If the answer to this question is yes, that is an admission of guilt and a matter of treason because the emperor in Rome is the king of everyone everywhere including the Jews. The gospel of Mark began with the declaration that the subject of his narrative was Jesus Christ the Son of God. The gospel of John also declares this truth in the beginning with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." John's gospel thus declares that this man who is now bound before Pilate was the real king over everyone everywhere. Jesus' answers Pilate's question with a question: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate then tells Jesus his own religious leaders have brought him there, and asks "What have you done?" Again Jesus does not answer the question but makes a statement: "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." Then again Jesus states, "But as it is, my kingdom is not here." Jesus thus affirms that he is indeed a king, but his kingdom is not a kingdom of this world. He is a king, but a king not like other kings for he does not respond as other kings by calling his followers to commit acts of violence. Jesus' behavior throughout the gospel accounts is very unlike kings as understood by the world. While earthy kings, prefects, emperors and politicians use their kingship, their power in one way; this king of kings chooses to speak to the lowly and the rejected, to heal and restore those without means or power. Jesus has turned the idea of kingship upside down. So Jesus represents a different type of kingdom, a kingdom not of this world. Jesus' kingship and kingdom is not one which this world recognizes. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the holy city, he entered not as worldly conquerors on a horse, but seated on a donkey. At all points throughout the gospels, Jesus' kingship is declared in ways the secular world either disregards or disdains. But does this mean that Jesus' kingdom—God's reign—is not present? What does Jesus mean when he declares his kingdom is not of this world? Perhaps, this statement doesn't mean as it is often interpreted, that Jesus' kingdom is that of heaven. Perhaps it means just as Jesus is a king unlike other kings, his kingdom is different as well. The values of Jesus' kingdom are different from the values held by most of the secular world, the world which surrounds us. The kingdom of God came near when Jesus walked the earth with us, but if we also place the values of that kingdom not of this world as our values and live accordingly, then does not that kingdom come here? As his followers our values are also supposed to be different—not of this world. That doesn't mean that the values Christ taught cannot be present here within this reality that is ours. Walter Brueggemann, an accomplished Biblical scholar and theologian describes this as the alternative reality available to us. We don't have to live by the values that the secular world lifts up claiming that those are the only reality. If we are the followers of Jesus Christ, then our world view should claim that alternative reality—that we are the subjects of the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords whose kingdom is now; whose kingdom is eternal. Jesus said to Pilate: "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 Revelation 1: 5-6, John of Patmos calls Jesus Christ “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of earth.” From the testimony of Jesus’ life we find the truth of God’s kingdom—that God is love, that God desires for everyone to have abundant life, that we are called to participate in God’s reign by our relationships with others. That was Jesus’ faithful witness to what the kingdom—the reign of God—is to be because we through Christ have been made to be a kingdom, priest serving his God and Father. Our reality thus should be that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords over us now. The world around us may not recognize that truth, but that is our truth. That is the where and when of Christ’s kingship. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.