

## Invitation to the Table

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**Today's Epistle reading from the Lectionary is 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Paul tells us to "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."**

**Note: it doesn't instruct us to be thankful *for* the circumstances, just in them. No matter how challenging your life is right now, there are things for which to be grateful.**

**My late hero, Fred Rogers, told of his boyhood experience when catastrophes would be covered on TV and he would be upset and frightened. His mother told him, "Look for the helpers." In the most devastating losses, there are helpers.**

**In the worst of circumstances, we can take comfort in the helpers and at this Table we can take comfort in the reminders that in Christ God is with us, Emmanuel.**

**And in all circumstances let us not forget to be grateful.**

## **Pastoral Prayer**

**From the first day of Advent, almost a year ago, we have come full circle, ending the church year with the celebration of “Christ the King Sunday.” We witnessed the wonderful birth, the great healing moments, and the teachings that have sustained people throughout the centuries. We wept with those at the cross and rejoiced with those who found the tomb empty at sunrise on that first Easter. We celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the courage of the disciples who risked everything to proclaim the good news to all people. It seems appropriate that Christ the King Sunday is also the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Let us pray.**

**Sovereign Lord and Christ, come and take reign in our hearts today. Remind us that your kingdom is not of this world and that it is a kingdom of hope and light. You call us to be Kingdom people, living in the knowledge that peace, justice, and hope are not only possible, but can be the ruling factor in a world for those who follow you.**

**Thank you that in your kingdom of infinite love and mercy, you have acknowledged and claimed even those who don’t acknowledge you—that you love and accept even those who make a mockery of your call to humble, self-giving servanthood. Help us to be the kind of disciples who live for others, who welcome everyone with words of kindness, who act with mercy and peace to all in need, and who proclaim in word and deed Christ risen and his example glorified.**

**As we have brought before you the names of people and situations needing your healing and comforting touch, hear us as we also open our own hearts for healing and comfort. Remind us that we are never out of your grace and mercy. Grant us confidence that you will give us the strength and wisdom to be true disciples, and we celebrate and honor you, now and forever. AMEN.**

## Christ the King? Really?

JOHN 18:33-37 (NRSVUE) *Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"* <sup>34</sup> *Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"* <sup>35</sup> *Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"* <sup>36</sup> *Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to 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."* <sup>37</sup> *Pilate 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."* The Word of God for the people of God!

Since Pentecost, the Lectionary has focused the church on Jesus' teachings and ministry and has guided our reflection on how to live as followers of Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark. Suddenly, today, the Lectionary slam dunks us into the climactic third act of the Gospel of John.

It's a strange scripture for the final Sunday of the Church Year. We expect it on Good Friday. And if we read the very next verse, after Jesus says, "...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Pilate asks, "What is truth?" John just leaves it there. Jesus doesn't respond. The question is not answered. We'd like to know.

And look at Jesus' strange responses; playing word games, never giving a straight answer. That's the way of rabbis, but why isn't Jesus defending himself?

When we realize that in the liturgical year of the church today is called "Christ the King" Sunday, the choice of Gospel reading begins to make sense. Pilate asks a straight question: "Are you a king?" The fact is, Jesus never claimed to be a king; or to be the Jewish Messiah. So, why doesn't he explain that to Pilate? It's strange.

It's not good practice to use Mark to explain John (or Luke to rescue Matthew), although there are overlaps; but in all four Gospels, Jesus never claimed to be king or the Jewish Messiah. So, why did the disciples continue to insist that he was? And why have Christians for 2,000 years called him, "Messiah?" King of Kings? Lord of Lords?

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus presented himself as "Son of Man," and when he asked the disciples, "Who do you think I am?" and Peter responded, "You're the Christ—the Messiah," Jesus hushed him and told him not to spread that around.

King in our hearts? That's cute. But, while I would not presume to unravel 2,000 years of tradition and doctrine, I believe Jesus was more than king—more than anything anticipated in the Jewish image of Messiah.

The disciples and the New Testament Epistles called Jesus "Christ," which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Mashiach"—in English, Messiah. Israelite kings were called Mashiach. The word literally means "anointed one," or "expected one." The question is, "If Jesus is the Christ, 'the expected one,' whose expectations does he fulfill?"

What is a king? What is the purpose of a King? How has "king" been corrupted in

human history? President. Chairman. Monarch. Ruler. Czar. Fuhrer. Tyrant.

The issue for Pilate, and for the liturgical "Christ the King Sunday," and the issue for us is "Who is Jesus." While it may seem he's playing word games with Pilate, look at vs. 36: *"If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews."* [Quick side note: John is not antisemitic. For him, "the Jews" are the corrupt Temple oligarchy—the priests and scribes. His word for the ethnic Jews is "Israel."] Jesus says, *"If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the (corrupt Temple oligarchy)."* Kingdoms of this world rest on power and violence or the threat of violence. Not just dictators and militant nationalists, but every human state, including all forms of democracy have been born and sustained through violence.

In contrast, Jesus' vision of God's rule rests on self-giving love, which every human state regards as "unrealistic." "The Beatitudes" are cute; but get real, Jesus. The followers of Jesus live in the tension between the realities of this world—which is also God's world and to which Christians belong—and the ultimate reality of God's present-and-coming kingdom already manifest in Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't imply his followers should retire into some "spiritual kingdom" (King in my heart) and concede the political realities of this world to those for whom belligerent partisan politics is the only reality.<sup>1</sup> *"If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting..."* The implication is clear. Nothing violent represents any kingdom over which Jesus is King.

But it goes over Pilate's head. He presses: *"So you are a king?"* Jesus answered, *"You say that I am a king."* The Greek phrase can be translated more than one way, e.g., "King is your word" (Revised English Bible); "You are right" (NIV); "It is you who say that I am a king" (New Jerusalem Bible). In John's context, it's best understood as an affirmation, not a denial or a clever avoidance of the issue. He indeed is a king, but not in Pilate's understanding of the word<sup>2</sup> nor in any kingdom rooted in violence.

So, who is Jesus? What role does he play in human life and human history? If we use John to explain John, Jesus is the Word that was in the beginning and that became flesh and lived as God intended humans to live from the moment God said, "Let us make man in our own image." God never intended humans to rule over one another. God never intended humans to divide into tribes and fight over territory or food supply or political ideology. God never intended humans to be engaged in dehumanization.

How do we know what God intended? Do we dare presume to know the mind of God? Isaiah prophesied (55:8-9):

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*

But we're not left in the dark. There are clues. Consider creation: God placed the

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 350). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

man and the woman in a garden that supplied their every need. But that primal fear of “not enough” leads to much of what troubles humanity.

And when, like assertive two-year-olds, the humans exerted the autonomy that was part of the image of God created within them, God gave them meaningful work by which their self-assertion was justified in partnership with God's ongoing creation.

Dare we presume to know the mind of God? Consider the covenant with Abraham: God said, “I will bless you so you will be a blessing... and through you all nations of the earth will be blessed.” Is that not a clear statement of the mind of God?

Consider the words of the prophet Amos (5:21-25)

*I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them,  
and the offerings ... of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like water  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

And consider the words of the prophet Jeremiah (7:5-7):

*“...if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly toward one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.”*

Are you catching a pattern here? It is not presumption when the mind of God is revealed. And for John, the complete revelation of the mind of God is the Word that was in the beginning with God—the Word that was God—the flesh and blood fulfilment of all the intentions and purposes of God. In today's reading, “*For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.*” At the Table the night before, he had said to his disciples (John 14: “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*”

But is he king? Not in any way we understand the word. He is the human reflection of the God whose use of power is to create, redeem, and sustain all that is in peace and harmony. The writer of Colossians puts it this way (1:15-20):

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, ...all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

When faced with that, the word, “king,” tucks its tail crawls under a chair to hide.