

John 18:33-37 Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “**Are you the King of the Jews?**” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 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?” Jesus 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.**” 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.”

It's Christ the King Sunday – So let's talk about **dominion** and **sovereignty**.

A few weeks ago, our daughter Sofia went with some classmates to Stratford in Ontario, Canada to see some plays. Mark and I crossed the border to pick her up at the train station in Windsor at midnight. We were all a bit groggy, and as we passed back through into the US, we instructed Sofia, - as we always tell our kids as we step through security on a airplane, or cross a border checkpoint, - ‘this isn't a time to make jokes, just answer the questions with the truth, in a clear direct voice.’ That night, it was an odd thing, to have one child at home in bed in one place, our country – and the other in another land, and to have nothing but passports and customs agents and good will and the right answers allowing us to pass between the two borders – bringing us back together as a family. Nothing to hide, but still disconcerting. Standing in a kind of in-between-place. Not knowing quite where we stand.

Remembering this sensation reminded of a scene described in a book called “This Beautiful Mess” by a guy named Rick McKinley.¹ He's flying home from Denver, somehow scores an upgrade, first class, and is seated next to a man wearing a bright red robe with a fluffy collar. While they wait for peanuts, they make small talk. He finds out the robed seatmate is from a small country – *it sounds vaguely familiar to him, but he's not sure where it is.*

More small talk ensues – “So, what do you do there?”

“I rule there,” the man in the robe answers. “It's my country. I am the king.”

“You're KIDDING!” – *a pretty lame response, but he's never met a royal much less sat next to a king on an airplane!*

“It's true.” The man says quietly with a humble smile.

The peanuts arrive. More munching. *He thinks of what to say next to the king—about thrones, subjects, royal lineage, responsibilities. But this question pops out:*

“I have to ask – do you have an actual crown?”

“Yes, - but it's not with me,” the king answers. “I wear it for special occasions - when I'm ruling. I don't rule on an airplane.”

And that's when we get it. As impressed as we might be with his imperial royal highness, on this plane he's pretty much just another guy. He's a king, yes, but his kingdom is not where we live, so his reign has no practical impact, his rule has no bearing on our lives. He can't order us around, expect us to bow, offer us privileges, pardons or protections – all the usual king stuff. Not here anyway. Here, he's just a nice guy eating peanuts. A nice guy with a cool fluffy red outfit.

Both of these stories disrupt the way we think about **dominion** (which has to do with jurisdiction, territory), and about the **sovereignty** rulers that have over our lives (which has to do with power, authority).

It is right and good to be upright citizens, people who follow the laws of the land we live in. But - as Christians, I think we're always meant to stand in that in-between-place – with questions about whose kingdom we really live in and to whom we really belong.

So let's get right into that in-between space as we hear a surprising conversation that unfolds between *another* two men – both kings in their own way - who meet for the first time in John's Gospel. We actually have a lot to learn here from the questions of Pontius Pilate. Yes, Pontius Pilate – a Prefect in the Roman Empire, appointed to rule over the whole region of Judaea by another even more powerful King, the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

¹ “This Beautiful Mess: Practicing the Presence of the Kingdom of God” Multnomah Press, 2013, Rick McKinley

Pilate enters the government headquarters, - an official, in-between space. He summons Jesus, who has nothing to hide, but still, it's disconcerting, he's unprotected in the space. And Pilate asks him "Are you the King of the Jews?"

A **king** – asks a **king** – 'are you the **King**?'

Jesus answers Pilate's question with another question, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Ah - the power flips here: Now the one **being** questioned, **asks** the questions.

"Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

In other words, does my life/my authority speak for itself, or are you relying hearsay of those who are threatened by what they've seen me do? – (which by the way is not exactly King-like behavior – consorting with lepers and demoniacs, and eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, allowing a foreign woman to publicly 'school' him in front of his disciples and actually changing his mind because of what she has to say, breaking the Sabbath, feeding the poor people who wander around in packs, paying more attention to the children than the honored religious leaders, telling stories than **no one** – not even his followers, really understand).

"Am I the King? Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate replies "Look, I don't have anything to do with this. I'm a Roman, You're a Jew. I'm a government official. You're a religious leader. Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. I'm just trying to figure out who you are, how to make sense of you, and why you are here?"

Pilate asks: 'What have you done? Are you the King?'

Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not from this world. *Listen to that answer. There's a lot to take in in those words.*

"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.**"

So he answers without answering – 'I am The King – but not in the limited ways you think I am. I'm not limited by allegiances and titles and jurisdictions and power. By borders or political factions or market shares. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting – jockeying, posturing, acquiring, warring, – to keep me in place. To overthrow YOU! But my Kingdom doesn't operate that way, isn't interested or defined by such things.

Wherever it IS on earth AS IT IS in heaven." - Jesus says That is the kingdom of God!

That's why – as Christians – we have to learn to get very comfortable standing in that disorienting, surprising in-between-places - recognizing that we belong to something bigger than our loyalties and preferences, accepting that losing our places, losing our very lives for the sake of another is the greatest love, - really understanding that the least, the least impressive, the weakest, the LAST one is the FIRST one – in God's kingdom.

Jesus' own disciples ask Jesus, "What is the Kingdom of God like?" Jesus answers -- like a little bit of yeast mixed in with flour; like a small treasure hidden in a huge field, like a merchant in relentless search of a single pearl, like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds, like two copper coins offered by a poor widow.

Small things

Hidden things

Seemingly insignificant things.

It is not what you think it is. . . it is almost never what you think it is."

Pilate, a King, asks Jesus - again, "So, are you a King?"

And Jesus answers: You say that I am. But as it is, my kingdom is not from this world.

So here are OUR questions for Christ the King Sunday: *let's really wrestle with them – I hope we will:*

What does it really mean for us to follow a King who is 'not from this world?'

What practical impact does his reign have on our every day lives – really?

What if we picture ourselves passing through a border, or stepping off an airplane, or out this church, and into an actual kingdom, under the sovereign reign of Jesus Christ, -- whose warriors are peacemakers, whose strength is mercy, whose currency is absolutely free, and whose power is LOVE? **Amen.**