

Born to Be King



Theme: The Reign of Christ: Proper 29/(34) 26th Sunday after Pentecost Year B
Object: A crown
Scripture: "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." John 18:37 (NIV)

What do you want to be when you grow up? A teacher, a policeman, a lawyer, a doctor, or a nurse? There are so many jobs from which to choose. How do we decide? Some might choose a job where they think they can make a lot of money. Another might choose to be a teacher because of their love for children. Another might choose to be a doctor or a nurse because they want to help sick people become well. Some might choose to follow their parents in their chosen profession. Quite often a person starts out in one job and then decides it isn't the right one for them and they choose another type of work. When we are children, we may say, "I want to do this or that when I grow up." It doesn't always work out that way.

Do you think Jesus ever thought about what he was going to be when he grew up? He could have become a carpenter. His earthly father, Joseph, was a carpenter, and when Jesus was a young man, he worked with his father in his carpenter's shop. Perhaps Jesus might have chosen to be a doctor. He certainly had a gift for healing people. He might have chosen to be a wine maker. When he turned water into wine at a wedding feast, the guests thought it was the best wine they had ever tasted. Surely Jesus could have gone into the fishing business. He once told some fishermen where to cast their nets and they caught so many fish that their nets could not hold them all.

Those would have all been good choices for Jesus, but that was not what he was born to do. Here is something that will give you a hint. **(Hold up the crown.)** Who would wear a crown? That's right! A king. Now, a person doesn't just wake up one day and say, "I know what I want to be... I want to be a king." No, **a person has to be born to be a king.**

During the last days of his life on earth, Jesus was arrested and put on trial. He was asked by Pilate, "**Are you the king of the Jews?**"

"Is that your idea, or did others talk to you about me?" Jesus asked.

"It was your people who handed you over to me. What have you done?" Pilate replied.

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to defend me. My kingdom is from another place."

"So, you are a king then," said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world."

He was born to be King, but not the kind of king that wears a crown and rules an earthly kingdom. His kingdom is in Heaven where he rules now and forever.

Heavenly Father, we offer praise to Jesus, our King. We choose to follow him each day. We look forward to living with him in heaven where he reigns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen

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So there he was, Pontius Pilate, of course, the procurator of Judea. I just love Frederick Buechner's updated description of the scene of today's gospel. Pilate has been on the phone talking to his wife. Maybe you can catch the flavor of it too.

When his wife finally hangs up and he swings back to his desk, he finds he is no longer alone. They have brought the up-country messiah in for questioning. Pilate is caught off-guard, and before he knows what he is doing, he takes a cigarette from an onyx box on his desk and lights it. [He has been trying to quit.] The man stands in front of the desk with his hands tied behind his back. You can see that he has been roughed up a little. His upper lip is absurdly puffed out and one eye is swollen shut. He looks unwashed and smells unwashed. His feet are bare-big, flat peasant feet although the man himself is not big. There is something almost comic about the way he stands there, bent slightly forward because of the way his hands are tied and goggling down at the floor through his one good eye as if he is looking for something he has lost, a button off his shirt or a dime somebody slipped him for a cup of coffee. If there were just the two of them, Pilate thinks, he would give him his carfare and send him back to the sticks where he came from, but the guards are watching, and on the wall the official portrait of Tiberius Caesar is watching, the fat, powdered face, the toothy imperial smile, so he goes through the formalities.

"So you're the king of the Jews," Pilate says. . . .

The man says, "It's not this world I'm king of," but his accent is so thick that Pilate hardly gets it, the accent together with what they have done to his upper lip. As if he has a mouth full of stones, he says, "I've come to bear witness to the truth," and at that the procurator of Judea takes such a deep drag on his filter tip that his head swims and for a moment he's afraid he may faint.

He pushes back from the desk and crosses his legs. There is the papery rustle of wings as the pigeon flutters off the sill and floats down toward the cobbles. . . . Cigarette smoke drifts over the surface of the desk - the picture of his wife when she still had her looks, the onyx box from Caesar, the clay plaque with the imprint of his first son's hand on it, made while he was still a child in nursery school. Pilate squints at the man through the smoke and asks his question.

He asks it half because he would give as much as even his life to hear the answer and half because he believes there is no answer and would give a good deal to hear that too because it would mean just one thing less to have to worry about. He says, "What is truth?" and by way of an answer, the man with the split lip doesn't say a blessed thing. Or else his not saying anything, that is the blessed thing. You could hear a pin drop in the big, high-ceilinged room with Tiberius grinning down from the wall like a pumpkin, that one cigarette a little unsteady between the procurator's yellowed fingertips.

Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale*; 1977, Harper Collins, NY, pp. 12-14

Pilate has a philosophical conversation with the beaten-up Jesus about truth; just one more verse and we hear the question, "What is truth?" But Jesus' life depends on the answer to the king question, even as our eternity may very well depend upon our answer. Is Jesus king – of the Jews or anybody else? If he is, how do his subjects respond? If he isn't, then the question makes no difference.

How would King Jesus' subjects respond to the violence wrought by teenagers and twenty-somethings in Paris as well as Allentown? This is fodder for "fearless conversation." Maybe *Lord of the Flies* should be read again by adults who had to read it earlier in school to see how even educated children can descend into savagery. Where do these children come from, how are they raised, do they have any parental guidance at all – all good questions to be wrestled with.

Why violence? At least one person has suggested that violence, at least within a group, is a search for belonging, albeit a perverted search. Individuals join gangs that perpetrate violence because of a need to belong; ISIS is an extended gang, mostly youth, who enjoy the power that fear exerts on others. They may not have developed a sense of conscience because of their early years either without parents or with wayward ones. Since it's natural law that the strongest wins, violence makes that happen, frightening others into submission with threats or violating their humanity by beating or even killing them to show who is on top, who is the strongest. Violence has no respect for law, only personal will. It has no boundaries and recognizes no authorities. Violence is sin out of control; it is one person or group of people establishing control over others in any way they choose. Violence is the *modus operandi* (the method of operating) of traditional kings and tyrants.

Christ the King, however, scorns violence. He is a Good Shepherd who has compassion on his erring sheep, gently leading back on the path. Christ the King is Emmanuel, God-with-us, God-among-us, our companion and guide. Christ the King is Light of the World, shining in our darkness, showing us hope for better and brighter days.

Kings were not known for "loving" their subjects. So Jesus confounded the people and Pontius Pilate as well. Jesus was anything but typical. And he would be king of the whole world, not just of the Jews or the Christians. Mighty bold claim – mighty powerful promise.

Jesus, the good king, is the one we worship today. He is the revealing of God, what God is really like, how God wants us treated. Jesus, the good king, actually favors the outcast, the unfavored, the strange, the friendless – this we know from his track record in the gospels with lepers and lame people and sinners. Jesus is "the Anointed One of God," or "Christ" who was born to "testify to the truth."

Fred Buechner again, on the unusual king we worship today:

If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter, and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party.

The world says, "Mind your own business" and Jesus says, "There is no such thing as your own business."

The world says, "Follow the wisest course and be a success" and Jesus says, "Follow me and be crucified."

The world says, "Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own" and Jesus says, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

The world says, "Law and order" and Jesus says "Love." The world says, "Get" and Jesus says, "Give."

In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is as crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy, too, is laboring less under the cross than under delusion. "We are fools for Christ's sake," the Apostle Paul says. "Ultimately the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, the lunacy of Jesus is saner than the grim sanity of the world." (Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 171)

Let us worship this unusual King, "all glorious above!"

The Rev. Robert E. Mitman