

**Colossians 1:9-20**

**John 18:28-40**

**November 20, 2022**

**Christ the King Sunday**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**LONG LIVE THE KING!**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

“The Queen is dead, long live the King!” That was the headline of many articles on September 8, 2022 and following, once the death of Queen Elizabeth had been announced. The declaration was first translated from French as “The King is dead, long live the King” in 1422 when Charles VII succeeded his father, Charles VI. The phrase represents the reality that sovereignty immediately passes to the next monarch, to avoid any lapse of rule. In 1272, English King Henry III died, but his son, Edward I, was off fighting in the Crusades. To avoid any struggles for power in Edward’s absence, the Royal Council announced, “The throne shall never be empty; the country shall never be without a monarch” and immediately declared Edward I the king, who ruled *in absentia*. Thus, although King Charles III will not be enthroned and crowned until May 6, 2023, as we heard last Sunday, he immediately became king upon the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth II.

Today is Christ the King Sunday on the Christian church calendar. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, marks the beginning of a new Christian year. Here’s how the Presbyterian Mission Agency describes the meaning and importance of this day: “The festival of Christ the King (or Reign of Christ) ends our marking of Ordinary Time after the Day of Pentecost, and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope for Christ’s coming again at the end of time. The day centers on the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the whole universe. The celebration of the lordship of Christ thus looks back to Ascension, Easter, and Transfiguration, and points ahead to the appearing in glory of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Christ reigns supreme. Christ’s truth judges falsehood. As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil. Such concepts as these cluster around the affirmation that Christ is King or Christ reigns! As sovereign ruler, Christ calls us to a loyalty that transcends every earthly claim on the human heart. To Christ alone belongs the supreme allegiance in our lives. Christ calls us to stand with those who in every age confessed, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord!’ In every generation, demagogues emerge to claim an allegiance that belongs only to God. But Christ alone has the right to claim our highest loyalty. The blood of martyrs, past and present, witnesses to this truth.”<sup>1</sup>

It seems appropriate, then, to shout “Long live the King!” on this Christ the King Sunday. After all, in the next few weeks you’re bound to hear the majestic strains of Handel’s “Hallelujah!” chorus, which he based on Revelation 19:6, “Hallelujah! For the

Lord our God the Almighty reigns,” Revelation 19:16, “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords,’” and Revelation 11:15, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” When Handel completed the “Hallelujah” chorus, he allegedly told his servant, “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, today’s story from the Gospel of John about Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate reminds us that before Jesus was and is worshiped and hailed as King of kings and Lord of lords, he was charged with a capital crime against the Roman Empire, mocked for his claim to be a king, and crucified, dead, and buried because of his kingship. From Pilate’s perspective, and many in the crowd outside Pilate’s headquarters early that morning, there was no shout of “Long live the King!” Instead, the cry was “Crucify him!”

How ironic that the Jewish religious leaders stopped short of entering Pilate’s headquarters because they didn’t want to be religiously defiled so as to miss out celebrating the Passover. They were in the midst of their preparations for the great festival celebrating God delivering them from slavery in Egypt – during which they would sacrifice the Passover lamb. At the same time, they were handing over to Pilate the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, so he could be crucified.

How ironic that these same religious leaders would soon recite in their Passover celebration psalms praising and glorifying God as their true King, ending with this prayer, “From everlasting to everlasting thou art God; beside thee we have no king, redeemer, or savior; no liberator, deliverer, provider; none who takes pity in every time of distress or trouble. We have no king but thee. Amen.” And, yet, when Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” the chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” (John 19:15)

How ironic that, when given a choice by Pilate, the crowd chose Barrabas instead of Jesus. In Matthew’s version of the story, we learn that Barrabas’s first name was Jesus. Did you know that Barabbas means “son of the father”? So, instead of choosing “the Son of the Father” (capital “S,” capital “F”), they chose “the son of the father” (lowercase “s,” lowercase “f”). Matthew describes Barabbas as “a notorious prisoner.” In Mark’s story, he was “in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.” Luke tells us the same thing as Mark, while John calls Barabbas a “thief.” But that word “thief” can also mean “insurrectionist.” How ironic that Jesus, the true “Son of the Father,” is falsely accused, condemned, and murdered for insurrection, when Jesus Barabbas, the real insurrectionist and murderer, is set free.

How ironic that two hundred forty-seven years ago, the eight-and-a-half-year Revolutionary War began, when the American colonies rebelled and threw off the yoke of King George III. Resentments had been growing for more than ten years because of the King’s harsh treatment of the colonies, including taxes, levies, tyranny, corruption,

the presence of standing British army in the colonies, and many more grievances. Every 4<sup>th</sup> of July we shoot off fireworks, have cookouts, eat watermelon and home-made ice cream, enjoy parades, and celebrate that we no longer have to live under a king such as George III, or any other king, for that matter.

Then we come to worship on a Sunday in November and open the service with these words: “Come, let us bow down and worship the King of kings!” At least we took the time to confess this morning “that although we willingly say that ‘Jesus is King,’ we often fail to bow our knees before him and live lives worthy of his followers. Instead, we grant our allegiances to the things of this world.” In our American culture, many times we don’t even want to do what our democratically elected leaders ask of us, much less submit to some royal, unelected authority in our lives. So, what exactly do we mean when we worship Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords on Christ the King Sunday?

Do you remember in the gospels when the brothers James and John asked Jesus to put them in positions of power when he established his kingdom? In a sense, Jesus told them, “Be careful what you ask for.” The other ten disciples were angry with the brothers. But Jesus called all twelve of them together and told them what kind of King he was and what his kingdom was all about: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28) That must be what Jesus was talking about when he told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” In other words, Jesus’s kingdom was and is different from the status quo, way things are with all other kings and kingdoms.

This is such a contrast to the “kingship” of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem and Emperor Tiberius in Rome. By and large the Romans were tolerant of other religions, as long as their teachings and practices didn’t disturb the civic order or threaten Rome’s imperial hold. However, as soon as the rumblings about Jesus being a king and having a kingdom reached Pilate, he snuffed out the threat – not just with Jesus, but with rebellious leaders who rose up against Rome and with the common people who chafed under Pilate’s and Rome’s oppression and tyranny.

Oh, and one more thing – it’s almost tempting to see Pontius Pilate as a sympathetic figure in these gospel stories, as a leader caught between a rock and a hard place who tried his best to set Jesus free. Ultimately, however, Pilate was the only one who had the authority to send Jesus to the cross – and he did. Historical records show that Pilate probably didn’t lose a whole lot of sleep over Jesus’s crucifixion – another day’s work done in keeping the peace in Jerusalem and keeping the emperor happy in Rome.

In 1902, French writer Anatole France published a short story called “The Procurator and the Patrician.” In the story, old friends Aelius Lamia, a Roman patrician, and Pontius Pilate reunite later in life in Italy and talk about what they’ve been doing over the years. They swap tales of their physical problems. Pilate complains bitterly about his time in Judea and having to deal with the Jewish people. At the end of the story, Lamia tells Pilate about a young woman who had bewitched him, then disappeared unexpectedly. Lamia tells Pilate, “But I got news about her later. She had attached herself to a small company of men and women who were followers of a young Galilean miracle-worker. His name was Jesus, he came from Nazareth. Do you remember the man? You had him crucified for some crime.” “Jesus of Nazareth,” Pilate repeated the name. “No,” he said, “it does not ring a bell.” He yawned, “It’s getting late. Would you like to stay the night?”<sup>3</sup>

On this Christ the King Sunday – for that matter, every day – let us not be like Pontius Pilate and yawn and forget who Jesus of Nazareth was and is. Let us not be like the religious leaders who said, “We have no king but the emperor.” Let us not reject the King who died on the cross and delivered us from sin. Let us not turn a deaf ear to Jesus’s voice, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

Instead, let us always remember who Jesus of Nazareth is and what he has done for us. Let us always be faithful disciples of the King who could have saved himself by coming down from the cross, but chose not to. Let us listen to what our Jesus our King has to say to us and follow where Jesus our King leads us.

During Queen Elizabeth’s state funeral, somebody in the United States facetiously (I hope) asked, “Why are they playing ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee’ at the Queen of England’s funeral?” Well, of course, it wasn’t “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” but “God Save the King,” the royal anthem of the United Kingdom since 1745. The first and last stanzas say:

*God save our gracious King!  
Long live our noble King!  
God save the King!  
Send him victorious,  
Happy and glorious,  
Long to reign over us:  
God save the King!  
Thy choicest gifts in store,  
On him be pleased to pour;  
Long may he reign:  
May he defend our laws,  
And ever give us cause,  
To sing with heart and voice,  
God save the King!*

The good news this Christ the King Sunday – and every day – is that the King saved us. And “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.”

Long live the King!

***Let us pray: Sovereign God, ruler of all creation, you sent Jesus to testify to the truth: that you alone are the Lord of life. Help us to listen always to his voice so that we may proclaim his realm of justice, peace, and endless love; through Christ, who reigns forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Christ the King/Reign of Christ” at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>2</sup>The History of “Hallelujah” Chorus from *Handel’s Messiah*, February 22, 2016 at [www.thetabernaclechoir.org](http://www.thetabernaclechoir.org).

<sup>3</sup>Laszlo Solymar, “The Procurator and the Patrician: a story by Anatole France,” at [www.thearticle.com](http://www.thearticle.com).