



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, November 25, 2012
The Feast of Christ the King

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
John 18:33-37
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THE KINGDOM OF TRUTH

When Pope Pius XI instituted the feast of Christ the King, the year was 1925 and the world was facing rising totalitarian powers: communist, fascist, and national socialist. In his encyclical *Quas primas*, the pope made it clear that he was establishing the feast of Christ the King to be celebrated on a Sunday, and not on a fixed calendar day, in order that the greatest number of the faithful would be reminded of Christ's true kingship, a kingship that Christ bears, the pope emphasized, not only as God but also as man, and a kingship that Christ exerts not only over individuals but also over peoples and nations and indeed over princes and rulers. Christ's kingship is a universal kingship.

That was 1925, about a decade after the rise of Lenin and still some years before Hitler's Final Solution.

In more recent times, popes (and particularly John Paul II) have deemphasized this hierarchical character of Christ's kingship. Rather than telling the kings and governors of this world that there is a universal king who is over them whose name is Christ, more recent Roman Catholic teaching emphasizes Jesus' solidarity with all human beings. John Paul told rulers that they should respect the dignity of the people over whom they ruled, because each of those persons has the dignity of Christ himself. In effect, John Paul said to rulers not "Christ is over you" but "Christ is under you." In the fact of this apparent inversion of Catholic teaching, one might ask, Well, is he a king or not?

We sense from Saint John's gospel the anguish that Pontius Pilate had over just this question. Pilate probes, asks, threatens, and all he gets is ambiguity. "My kingship is not *of this* world." So you aren't a king in the world? No, "My kingship is not *from* the world." Where does it come from? "You say that I am a king." Pilate leaves the scene without getting a straight answer.

Pilate would know how to treat Jesus if he were a king among other kings. Jesus would be a king who is supposed to be under Rome's rule, and if he has gotten out of line, then he should be corrected. Or he would be a king in challenge to Rome, and he should be conquered. Or he would be a king who had a rule, hitherto unknown to Pilate, that was beyond Rome's rule. Pilate could handle any of these situations, for in every case Jesus' kingship would be somehow on the same page as other kingships.

But such is not the case. Jesus is not a king that we can put alongside other kings. Jesus doesn't fit in with any line of rulers; there isn't "Washington, Adams, Jefferson, . . . Jesus . . ." Nor could there be, in some sort of hierarchy, "Bloomberg, Cuomo, Obama, Jesus."

Yet he is called King of kings, and at the final judgment it is he who will judge nations and rulers. Obama, Cuomo, Bloomberg, Jefferson, Adams, Washington, and Pontius Pilate—every one of them will be judged by him.

Well then, if his kingship is not political in the ordinary sense (one king among others), is it spiritual?

That, too, would make life easier for Pilate. Jesus' kingship then would not be worldly, it would be just something in the heart. John Paul in fact talked this way about Jesus' kingly rule: he said it was self-governance for the sake of service. Christ, he said, ruled himself perfectly so that he was able to offer perfect service to others.

And there is truth here, for just as Jesus is King of kings, so is he servant of all. But Jesus is not only a servant, and his kingship cannot be understood as merely spiritual. There is that last thing he says to Pilate, the very unsettling thing. "I came to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Here is a hint of the new kingdom that Jesus inaugurates, the kingdom of truth whose citizens Jesus, even as he speaks to Pilate, is drawing to himself. When Jesus takes over the heart, he draws his people out from underneath all existing powers. It is a hint, and it could be a threat, and Pilate is rightly disturbed.

Pilate did not understand Jesus' kingly authority. Nor did the popes of the last century, despite their bold and courageous writings in resistance of tyranny: no pope has been able to articulate the full dimensions of Christ's kingship. Nor can I. And here the problem is, for Pontius Pilate, for Pius, for John Paul, for Austin, for you—the problem is that the kingship of Christ goes beyond all attempts to grasp it. We can see that Christ isn't just another king. And yet we know he *somehow* rules over everything, including nations and cities and governments of all kinds. We can see that Christ wants to rule in our hearts. But that inner kingship is not limited to a private realm strictly separated from the public world.

The kingship of Christ goes beyond all our attempts to define it, because he really does rule over all things. This then is the task: to let Christ rule over all things. Jesus really is lord of my finances, of my capital, my savings, my property, my spending. He is lord of my body, the food I eat, the sleep I take, my sexuality, my friendships, my family. He is lord over my clothing, my casual interactions on the street; he is lord over everything I touch. He is also lord over me as a citizen of this city, as he is lord over the city itself. He is lord over my neighborhood, and thus lord over my place and relationship in my neighborhood. — And you see what I am doing? I am trying here to make a list of those things to which Jesus' kingship extends, and it is impossible to do! For the list would have to be infinite, because there is nothing outside Jesus' rule. Christians are to rejoice in Jesus' rule and to submit to it, to plunge into it, to participate in its extension through all things—to rejoice, to submit, to participate, again and again for it is never finished; there is always more of our life to turn over.

We never finish submitting, turning things over, to Jesus' rule. You stand by the bedside, and there is your fellow human being, lying somewhere on the frontier of the unknown. The wires, the tubes, the medicines; nurses, doctors, friends. And you submit, even there, to his kingship. There is nothing human that is outside his rule.