

WHERE WILL YOU MEET KING JESUS?

A Sermon for the Sunday of Christ the King

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John 18:33-38

Today is the last Sunday of the year—the liturgical year, that is. The Christian year is a way of telling again the story of Jesus. It begins with Advent, the time of preparation before Christmas. Then comes Christmas itself, the birth of the Lord, and Epiphany, the visit by the wise men. A later Sunday observes the Baptism of the Lord, another his Transfiguration. Then comes Lent, with its progress toward Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and the triumph of Easter. Summer's heat brings Pentecost, the birthday of the church. And in the Sundays after Pentecost the gospel texts move through the stories of Jesus.

And finally, at the end of the liturgical year, we come to this day, the last Sunday of the Christian year, the Sunday of Christ the King. The end of an old year always provides an occasion to look forward and backwards—forward to the coming of Christ, and backward in reflection: What have we learned about Christ Jesus in the past year? Are we any stronger in our love for Jesus than we were when this Christian year started. On this Sunday of Christ the King, can we affirm that Jesus is our King?

To consider those questions, the lectionary guides us to the encounter between Jesus and another ruler—Pontius Pilate. Pilate is not quite a king, but he represents the power of the Roman emperor, so in a way this is an encounter between two kings—King Jesus and Pilate, the representative of all earthly rulers.

The scary thing about this encounter is that Pilate has King Jesus right there in his chambers, and he never recognizes him. Here is the king of all the universe, and Pilate never knows it.

It's understandable. Pilate didn't wake up that morning saying to himself: "Today I'm going to meet the King of the universe." In fact, if anything, this day appeared to Pilate

to be another day like any other day, a day of trying to arbitrate the disagreements of these crazy people in this far-off part of the empire far from the bright lights of Rome. Being governor of Judea was no walk in the park.

So Pilate sat on his judgment seat, and the daily parade of thieves and robbers and rebels was brought before him. Here was one standing before him now. What was his name? Oh, yes, Jesus of Nazareth. Outside he could hear the crowd howling for the guy's blood.

But as best as he could tell, this prisoner had done nothing wrong. So Pilate decides to conduct his own interview. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Maybe if he could get some information, it would help him decide the case. But the prisoner was no help. He had the audacity to answer Pilate's question with another question: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Strange.

So Pilate tries again: "What have you done?" Again the prisoner answers in a strange way: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But my kingdom is not of this world."

By this time Pilate's patience is wearing thin: "So you are a king?" "For this reason I was born," replied the prisoner, "to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And Pilate, ever the cynic, replies: "What is truth?"

What scares me about this encounter is that Pilate had King Jesus standing right there before him, and never even knew it. It scares me because I wonder how often I have done the same thing—had Jesus standing right before me and never knew it.

Of course, if some angel would appear before my bed in the morning and announce: "This is the day you will encounter Jesus," I'd be on the alert. The thing is, it doesn't happen that way. Like Pilate, too often I deal with people in ways that are routine. I can't imagine that this phone call, this meeting, this encounter, will have any eternal significance. It's just another day.

Some years ago my family and I traveled in Europe. And while in Amsterdam we visited the Anne Frank House. Anne Frank, you remember, was the young girl who kept a diary that told of her experiences as she and her family hid out from the Nazis during World War II. The family hid in the attic of a house for over two years, until they were betrayed to the Nazis in 1944. Anne and most of her family died in concentration camps. Only her father, Dr. Otto Frank, survived the war.

So we visited the house, and entered through the narrow passage that entered the attic where Anne and her family would stay every day, utterly quiet, lest their hiding place be discovered.

On the walls were pictures of the family and other displays. One of those displays was of a series of letters that had been written to Dr. Frank. It appeared from these letters that he had sensed that the Nazi noose was tightening around them and other Jews in Europe. So, before they had gone into hiding, Dr. Frank had written letters to various governments around the world, seeking asylum or a visa so they could get away from this growing threat.

One of the countries he had written to, evidently, was the United States, for here was displayed the reply letter saying that the request for a visa had been denied. It was a form letter, issued over the signature of some bureaucrat in the U.S. government. Since this was long before the days of word processors, the letter was a form letter where the typist would fill in the appropriate blanks. “Dear (Blank)” it began, and Dr. Frank’s name had been typed in. “We regret that we cannot honor your application for a visa at this time to enter the United States.” The letter went on as some length to explain how they had been overwhelmed with visa applications, so of course they could not honor them all. However, the letter explained, they would be keeping his request on file and would deal with it at a later time. “The time you can expect to hear from us is”—and here the typist had entered—“date uncertain.”

I thought about the person who sent that letter, someone in an office who was harried by requests from too many people in Europe who were desperate to get out. One request among many. This bureaucrat probably didn’t even have the power to make a decision; higher ups had already decided on the policy. He was just following orders. If you had asked him later if he remembered that a particular letter from Dr. Otto Frank on that particular day, he would no doubt have said: No, I don’t remember.

How was he to know that, decades later, the refusal letter he wrote would be on display, where tourists from all over the world would see this failure to respond to a cry for help, a failure that included nations all over the world. The one who wrote the letter would never have suspected it, for it was just one of many letters, written on one of many routine days.

What scares me about Pontius Pilate was that he allowed the routines of the day to blind him to the presence of King Jesus. It was just another day, like any other. It was a day like I have too often, like you have, days when we make decisions that affect the lives of other people, and later we don't even remember.

The account of Pilate and Jesus here in the gospels is so brief, so tantalizingly fragmentary, that it has led to all sorts of speculation as to what happened to Pilate after his encounter with Jesus was over.

Some have imagined a happy ending, picturing Pilate as a later convert to the church. The Coptic branch of the Christian church, in fact, lists Pilate as a saint.

But there are other later legends that paint a darker picture. One story tells of Pilate being asked many years later about the man Jesus of Nazareth, and after thinking for a minute, Pilate replies: "Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth? No, I don't believe I have any recollection of him."

Somehow that seems the more likely, though less happy ending. After all, it had been such a routine day. Like all the routine days that come to all of us, all the days where decisions are made, some of which are good, and some of which we want to sweep under the rug of our memories.

So how was Pilate to know that the judgment he made to this prisoner on this day would be any different?

How was he to know that this encounter with this prisoner, which would be forgotten by later in the day, would end up being enshrined as a part of Holy Scripture?

How was he to know that the one whose face and name he could not remember would be later remembered and confessed by millions as the one who "suffered under Pontius Pilate"?

How was he to know that the one who died to satisfy Pilate's convenient compromise was in fact the one who paid not just for Pilate's misdeed, but for the sins of the whole world?

What scares me about this encounter between Jesus and Pilate is that it happens to me, and to you. The days are so routine, our responses so familiar, that Jesus slips in and out of our lives and we never even know it.

What we affirm on the Sunday of Christ the King is that Jesus is our King, our Lord, and that he is alive among us. He's out there somewhere, where we will encounter him. When we fail to recognize him, we must depend on his forgiveness. Lord, have mercy upon us. Give us another chance.

I guess what it means is that I've got to take seriously every person I encounter, because one of them is going to be Jesus. †