



“Out of This World”

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John 18:33-37

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For much of my adult life, I have considered myself to be somewhat of a realized eschatologist. That’s a fancy theological way of saying that I believe we are living in the reign of God here and now, rather than looking at heaven as merely a future goal. Eschatology deals with the end times, the final consummation of God’s creation. “Realized” in this context doesn’t mean to think of or be aware of something, but to live it in the present. *Realized eschatology*, then, means to see the kingdom of God as a present reality at least as much as a future hope.

Where do people get such ideas? Why, from Jesus himself. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15, Matthew 4:17) Most of his teaching was about embodying the kingdom of God. And Jesus taught us to pray that God’s kingdom would come “on earth as it is in heaven.”

The idea of the reign of God as a present reality keeps us from thinking of this life as simply the qualifying round for the life to come. We’re not just being tested toward eternity, biding our time until Christ comes again. If the kingdom is a present reality, and we are called to take part in Christ’s work, then what we do should be to shape the world to replicate the kingdom of God as closely as possible. Things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, breaking down barriers, speaking up for the voiceless, standing in solidarity with others created in the image of God who have been left out or left behind. The social gospel or social justice movement within the church grows out of this commitment. (It doesn’t simply bow to the culture as some critics insist.)

Today, we celebrate Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. What better time to reflect on the lordship of Christ and the meaning of his kingdom? This day invites us to consider what it means to say that Christ is Lord or King. How do we shape our lives and our actions if we declare our highest loyalty to Christ?

Our text for today invites us to reflect on that very question. Here, nearing the conclusion of John’s gospel, Jesus has been arrested and sent to Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, on charges that he was a threat to the authority of Rome. Pilate, for his part, shows disdain for the charges and those who levied them. We imagine him summoning Jesus, looking him up and down, perhaps smirking as he asked, “Are *you* king of the Jews?” When Jesus asked if that question was coming from him or someone else, Pilate almost spat, “I’m not a Jew, am I? It’s your own people who handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus, knowing what was behind Pilate’s question, replied, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Pilate wasn’t interested in religious disputes or whether the temple leaders were happy. He wasn’t interested in Jesus’s miraculous works or the content of his sermons. What he wanted to know is, “Are you a threat to me or not?” In the Roman Empire, there could be only one ruler: Caesar. Herod carried the title of “king,” but he was only an honorary, provincial figure who served as a puppet. Pilate’s job was to maintain order in Judea. If Jesus had set himself up as a competing ruler, that would be a problem. But Pilate clearly *didn’t* see Jesus as a threat. He would later take him back to his accusers, saying, “I find no case against him.”

But was he correct? Pilate was thinking in earthly terms, the temporal law of the empire. Pilate understood power as derived through force and intimidation. He wanted to know if Jesus was going to mount an insurrection, to lead a rebellion that would threaten the stability of provincial Palestine.

“If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” It first appears that Jesus said this to assure Pilate that he didn’t present a physical threat. Good point, Jesus. But John recorded this exchange to point out that what we call justice is far from God’s justice, and to expose the fallacy of how earthly authority is derived. Earthly kingdoms and governments are secured and maintained through violence. But not so with Jesus and his reign. “As it is,” he said, “my kingdom is not from this world.”

Pilate, not entirely satisfied with this response, sought to clarify: “So...you *are* a king?” *Yes or no. Black or white. None of this complicated theological reasoning. Are you or aren’t you?*

But Jesus wouldn't give in to Pilate's binary thinking. "The whole reason for my existence, the reason I came into this world, is to testify to the truth. Everyone who is on the side of truth follows me." Evidenced by his infamous response, Pilate was not. "What is truth?"

Pilate concluded Jesus was not a threat. Whatever he understood of what Jesus had said, there was no reason in his mind to be concerned about a challenge to his authority or Caesar's. But he caved in to the voices around him out of expedience. It was the religious folks who couldn't tolerate Jesus. They wanted him dead, and they got their way.

Of course, the religious leaders weren't entirely wrong about the threat Jesus posed. He *did* upset the precarious balance between religion and empire. His mere presence challenged the religious establishment and their carefully constructed system of influence over the people. He taught that the ultimate authority belonged to God – not Caesar, not the temple system. After his Resurrection, as his followers grew in number and passion, the Roman Empire would realize the threat. Many more would give their lives, but that wouldn't stop the truth. Christian faith would outlast the temple system and would eventually eclipse the Emperor Cult.

We are living between the now and the not yet. The kingdom of God is at hand, yet it is not complete. And we need to be clear that no amount of good intentions or good works on our part will suffice alone to fulfill the reign of God. That will only happen when Christ comes again and God's final work is done. But still, we are called to live as though it is a present reality, carrying on Christ's work and remaining committed to the truth of God's hope for us.

How are we doing at that? Does Christ have authority in our lives, or are our loyalties divided? Do we put our trust in political figures or partisan agendas or ideological identities? Is Christ Lord over our time, our investments, our worldview, or do we reserve that role for ourselves? In our quest to live out our values, are we working toward the kingdom of God Jesus imagined, or are we trying to bend the world to our own preferences? Just because we claim Christ's name doesn't mean we always do what he would do.

The kingdom of God is at hand, yet Christ's kingdom is not from this world. We are called to live in a way that reflects and builds the kingdom of God, but we must always remember that kingdom is not *from* this world. God's authority is not derived through force or coercion or deception, but it is guided by truth and humility and love.

The religious leaders didn't comprehend the kingdom of God Jesus offered. Pilate didn't comprehend the kingdom of God Jesus offered. Even the disciples couldn't really comprehend the kingdom of God Jesus offered, at least not until after the Holy Spirit arrived. If we're honest, we don't, either most of the time. We prefer a Savior who triumphs over evil all by himself and invites us to the victory celebration. We prefer a Savior who tells us exactly what to do and when and how, so we can be sure we're going to be rewarded for our simple obedience. We prefer a Savior who sees the world the way we see it, whose sacred words affirm what we've known and believed about ourselves and the world all along. Instead, we get Jesus, who defies our idolatrous reductionism, who challenges our self-righteous assumptions, who answers our questions with questions, who makes us think and exert some effort ourselves. We get a Savior who calls us to discover truth without telling us exactly what it is, without programming us with a how-to guide that applies to all contexts or ensconcing a simple set of rules for all time.

If we find ourselves rejoicing in someone else's suffering, we've missed it. If we find ourselves subverting or concealing the truth, we've missed it. If we find ourselves hating those who oppose us, we've missed it. But when we fail, Christ helps us up, dusts us off, and says, "Try again."

So we work for justice and healing and wholeness. We daily examine our lives and our motives, entrusting them to God's will and God's way. Though our work will never be complete in this life, we know the king we are following and the kingdom we are building are not from this world. Let's continue to pursue truth in our words and in our lives, even when we struggle to find it, trusting Christ to point us in the way we should go. Amen.