

Rev. Lacey Hunter  
November 21, 2021  
Christ the King Sunday  
Text: Revelations 1: 4b-8

Today Christian communities around the world are celebrating what is known as Christ the King Sunday. From the perspective of the liturgical calendar, today is the end of another year of discipleship. Another year has gone by where we have listened to the stories of Jesus' ministry and asked, "What does this mean for how we are to live our lives?" Next week, with the start of Advent, the journey begins anew. But before we go into all of that, before we let the ads and holiday music leap us forward, before we move into the stories of hope and waiting, let's pause in this ending and ask ourselves, why Christ the King Sunday? What does it mean for kingship to be where the Christian journey leads to?

As I was writing this sermon, Kyle Rittenhouse, a white vigilante who crossed state lines into Wisconsin, killing two activists and wounding another in the Black Lives Matter uprisings last summer, was found not guilty on all accounts. This verdict hangs over today, begging the necessary questions, what power rules our lives and what will it take for Christ's reign and God's kingdom to come on earth? What does Christ the King have to say to this moment of struggle?

As Americans we don't have a monarchy – no matter how many times we watch the Crown, kings and queens do not govern our lives or receive our praise and adoration - but that doesn't mean we haven't been shaped by this understanding of leadership, government and power. Our cultural and historical understandings of kings and reign, judgement and ruling have been formed by the ways many kings have enacted power as domination. Because of this, images and interpretations of Christ the King have had many impacts. If we use the world's kings as models, then Christ as King can be leveraged as a reason to uphold hierarchies and patriarchies within our churches, relationships and world. Then, Christ as King can be used to justify hundreds of years of violence, extraction, and dominance in God's name. Is this what we are celebrating today, this worldly king who can condemn, dominate, colonize? This is the power of the world's king.

While language of Christ as King can be found in scripture, and we'll explore this more in a moment, the origin of Christ the King Sunday is actually fairly recent. The feast day known as Christ the King Sunday was first established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. The Pope used this feast day as a counter to what he understood to be the growing destructive forces of fascism and nationalism in Europe. If we celebrate Christ as King, then no human leader or dictator can ever truly be King. With Christ as ruler of our lives, then no emerging ideology can take control. If it is Christ whose kingdom reigns, then no nation-state can hold this power over us or be the ultimate guide for our lives. It can be a challenging reorientation, especially for those of us who have come to rely on and trust in governments, systems and institutions. And yet as Christians, we are often called again and again to turn away from the powers and principalities of the world and to turn towards Christ. To seek Christ's reign. To build God's kingdom. This is the power of Christ the King.

The scriptures that mark Christ the King Sunday, from the old testament prophets and psalms to the gospel and new testament books, all speak to this alternative understanding of power and the need for individual and collective reorientation towards God.

If we had read today's Gospel passage from John, we would have heard the story of Jesus standing before Pilate, moments before he is condemned to death. As we know from the gospel stories, there were whispers and shouts throughout the streets that proclaimed Jesus as King. It is likely that Pilate and what Pilate stood for, was threatened by any claim of Jesus as King. Pilate was after all, the Roman official in the Roman occupied territory of Jerusalem and Jesus was brought to him during the Passover festival, a Jewish festival celebrating the movements and liberation of an occupied, enslaved people. For Pilate to hear of and meet someone who was being affirmed as king and followed by the very people Pilate was actively part of colonizing, would be a threat to the institutional power. There could be no king but Caesar, no law other than Caesar's, no power but the power represented by Pilate's office. It is no surprise that Jesus was condemned to death in this Roman court. Consider the threat to imperial power Jesus and his followers represented to Pilate and those ranking above him. This criminal system that Jesus was brought before did exactly what it was set up to do. It lifted a veil of silence and fear over the masses rising up in revolt, and enacted death-dealing power in a way that felt all-encompassing and insurmountable. This is the power of the world's king.

I cannot read this gospel passage without also seeing all of the lives our modern day criminal justice system has put to death, all of the young black men wrongly convicted, all of the water protectors facing life in prison for safeguarding the earth, all of the immigrants who crossed an invisible line. Like the empire that condemned Jesus to death, these systems have done exactly what they were set up to do, to maintain white American power and silence the revolution that is afoot. The non-indictment of Kyle Rittenhouse reveals this truth. Unlike those condemned in the United States, a young white man can kill protestors and be found not guilty. This verdict lifts a veil of silence and fear over the masses rising up in revolt, and enacts death-dealing power in a way that for many, feels all-encompassing and insurmountable. This is the power of the world's king.

And yet, we know that in the story of Jesus Christ, these injustices and deaths are not where the story of Christ's power and God's kingdom ends. We know that in the days and months and centuries to come, the story continued. And Christ's power of love and freedom continued even in that very moment, as he stood before Pilate. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" We could also hear him asking, "Who do you think you are, the new empire?", "Are you the new occupation," "are you vying for this kind of power?" When Pilate says, "Are you the King of the Jews," I think that he is seriously asking, "Are you planning to take over?" And Jesus responds that he "came to testify to the truth," that his "kingdom is not of this world." In other words, "Yes, Pilate. I came to turn the world upside-down, but not with power like yours and not in any of the ways you expect." This is the power of Christ the King.

On this Christ the King Sunday, I need to believe that while the Rittenhouse verdict is once again proof that the system will uphold its own power, this verdict is not the only truth of power. Those beautiful summer uprisings brought out people who had been living out the revolution for decades and those who were in the streets and learning about racial justice for the first time.

From these uprisings, transformative justice practices gained momentum and visions of abolition and collective care grew in voice and power. And they continue, as people once again marched in the streets across the country this weekend, demanding the right and power to protest, to live, to be free. This is the power of Christ the King.

We began by asking the questions: Why Christ the King Sunday? What does Christ the King have to say to this moment of struggle? What does it mean for kingship to be where the Christian journey leads to? What power rules our lives and what will it take for Christ's reign and God's kingdom to come on earth? I think John's Gospel does a good job showing us the power of the world's kings and systems that seek total power and the death-dealing force that is used to maintain such power. Perhaps today's words from the Book of Revelation can be a guide for how to creatively, collectively confront those powers and with the power of Christ the King, turn them upside down for love and freedom.

The Book of Revelation can be a hard one to comprehend with its many mysterious creatures and prophecies, not to mention the Christian traditions of rapture and end times. But like Christ the King Sunday, Revelation has its origins in the steadfast critique of imperial ideology, militarism, commerce and rule. Revelation emerged as a coded guide to freedom from a people living under extreme Roman imperial surveillance and dominance. That God is and was and is to come is a reminder that this oppression will not last, there is power within us, before us and behind us that is stronger. This power will rise up from the dead and be faithful to life. This power of love and freedom will have dominion over the world.

There is no illusion in Revelation that the coming of Christ's reign and God's kingdom on earth will be an easy journey. There is and will be crumbling, overturning and yes, a new day of glory. "Look!" John proclaims in his Revelation, "The Lord is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen." In this prophetic vision and prayer, I too hear these prophetic words from Fredrick Douglas:

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it is must be a struggle."

On this Christ the King Sunday, I pray that our Christian journey leads us to God's kingdom, where power is not the shape of occupation, force, or enslavement but the shape of communities imagining and enacting transformation until the seemingly impossible is possible. I pray that the power that rules our lives is the power of Christ saying, "This is my body given, this is my flesh and blood committed to everyone's freedom," and the actions that emerge from this prayer repeated in our hearts. I pray that we will not stop until freedom comes. So when Advent begins, let us prepare the way to life, love and freedom, following in the pathways of power that Christ the King has laid out for us. Let us commit our hearts and minds, bodies and spirits to the power of love and freedom. As Althea offers a meditation on the piano, I invite you to consider: What kingdom prayers and visions are you bringing to this moment?