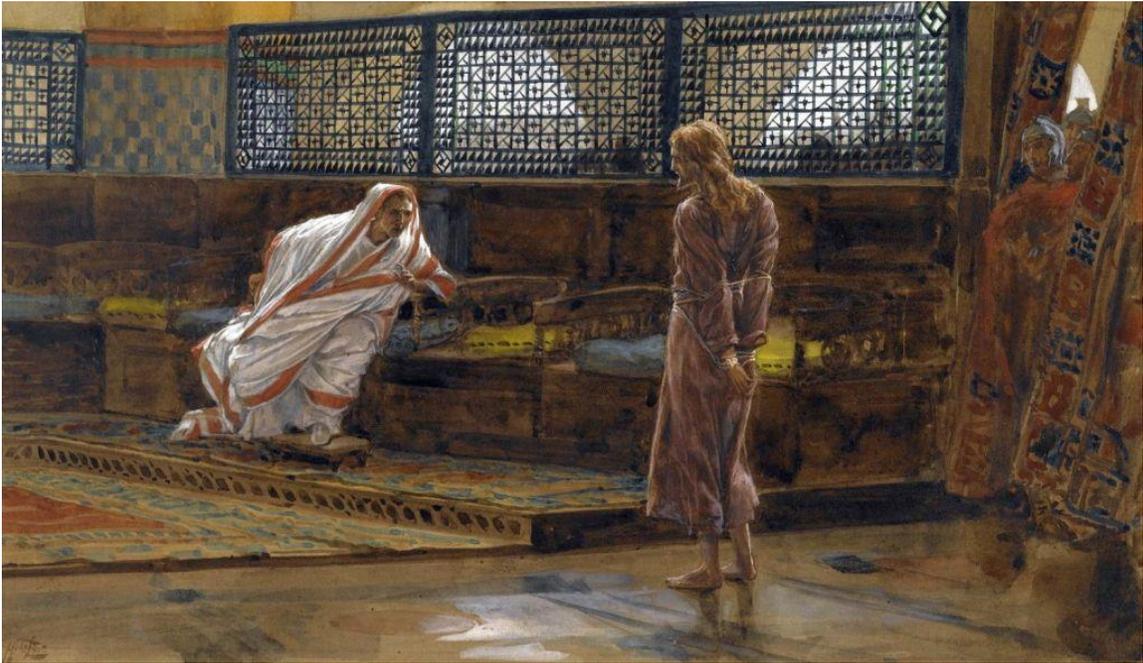


**St. George's Cathedral, Kingston Ontario
Sunday, November 25, 2018 - Feast of Christ the King
Eric Friesen**

Christ, a King?



- James Tissot, *Jesus Before Pilate*, painted 1886-1894, owned by Brooklyn Museum

This is a season of endings and beginnings. The end of the liturgical year with today's Feast of Christ the King, and next Sunday, the beginning of a new liturgical year with the First Sunday of Advent. It's also the end of the CFL Season with tonight's Grey Cup, and therefore in Canada the official beginning of winter. Endings and Beginnings.

For those of you who are not cradle-to-grave Anglicans, as I am not, it might seem odd that as we approach the Advent Season next Sunday, that today's Gospel reading takes us back to that moment in the Easter story when Jesus

is brought before Pilate. The reason is that this last Sunday after Pentecost is marked in our Church as the Feast of Christ the King / The Reign of Christ, and our gospel reading, as we just heard, references that exchange between Pilate and Jesus - about whether Jesus is a King, and what sort of Kingdom he, in fact, reigns over. And thereby hangs the story of a rather recent and unusual Christian feast inserted into this last Sunday of the church year.

I am grateful to Canon Alex Wakeling for helping me in my research on this Feast Day. Alex is a font of knowledge on these matters, with many resources to hand. Though if I speak in error on any of this, the errors are mine alone. Don't blame Alex.

The Feast of Christ the King, also known as the Reign of Christ, was invented by Pope Pius XI in 1925, in response to what he saw as growing secularism, and perhaps the hedonism of the Roaring 20's. It was picked up by Anglican and Lutheran and many other Protestant Churches, to the best of my knowledge, between 1970 and 1980 when the Revised Common Lectionary came out. So it's only been a part of our tradition for, at most, 50 years, which isn't that long. Most Anglican churches recognize it, though the Episcopal Church in the US does so at the discretion of individual parishes. In England, years earlier, this day was known as "Stir-Up Sunday," from the opening words of the Collect for the Day - "Stir Up we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy Faithful People." Which was said to remind housewives that they must now begin to make and stir up their Christmas puddings.

Just to make this even more complicated, the German Lutheran Church

celebrates today as Totensonntag, a Sunday to give thanks for all those who have died in the year past, their All Souls, and to reflect on our mortality. My people, the Mennonites, for whom this day also used to be Totensonntag, have now revived this at least in some congregations and is now known as Eternity Sunday. And the Swedish Lutheran Church calls this the Sunday of Doom, highlighting the day of the Last Judgement, which might go a long way to explaining why Ingmar Bergman's movies are so gloomy. There are many levels of meaning to this day in the larger Christian church. I sometimes think there's a grand attempt here on the part of all denominations to end the liturgical year with a spiritual bang, not an exhausted whimper.

Our approach here at St. George's is to celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. On the cover of your bulletin this morning is a painting from the late 1800's by the French/English painter James Tissot, *Jesus before Pilate*. It's a watercolour over graphite on grey wove paper, owned now by the Brooklyn Museum. The meeting of Jesus before Pilate is such a dramatic moment in the Jesus story, and I find it really comes alive in this painting, and it also emphasizes I believe the particular nature of Jesus' Kingship, which I will come to eventually.

When I began thinking about what I would say today, I asked myself the question: is the idea of "kingship" an outmoded one for this 2nd decade of the 21st century? In the West, all kings or queens, those that are left, are constitutional monarchs, very limited in actual power. I love the traditions of our church, but don't we need to be careful as Christians in speaking to secular society, to use language and images which are contemporary, which

in this case reflect the political realities of the countries in which we live? In recent times the idea of Jesus as Servant has become much more popular in contemporary theology. Isn't this a more valuable and persuasive image of who Jesus is?

The more I thought about it, I concluded that, in fact, the idea of King, or Queen, is still valid. We certainly don't want to be ruled by a King like the King of Saudi Arabia, but we in Canada accept limited monarchy, especially that of our dear Elizabeth 2nd, who has graced and legitimized the whole idea of constitutional monarchy since she was crowned in 1953 and commands huge affection. She is still our Queen, and Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

But apart from the respect we have for our Queen, there remains in our culture a great interest in royalty. I think the less we have absolute Kings or Queens ruling us, the more attached we are to the whole idea. Think of all the Royal Weddings we've watched in our lives, including the most recent of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Royal Rockstars. All Canadian and US TV networks on deck to cover it. I lived in the US for 13 years and was always astonished at how sentimentally and romantically Americans love anything to do with British Royalty and ritual and upper class English accents, and this the country that declared independence from Britain in 1776, sent King George 3rd packing, and sent a wave of Loyalists to this part of Canada. The popular press, judging from what I read in the checkout line at Metro, Hello Canada, People magazine, etc., and the more upscale ones like Vanity Fair, regularly profile Royalty, English and other. The Tudor Monarchs - Henry VIII and Elizabeth 1st in particular - still exert a

huge fascination, from the novels like *Wolf Hall* and *Bringing Up the Bones*, to movies and TV series of that period. In our own time, movies like *The Queen* and *The King's Speech*, and the Netflix series, *The Crown*, to mention just a few, have been incredibly popular. Kings, Princes and Princesses pervade children's literature, old and new, and video games. There is still a great romance about the idea and rituals of Royalty. So for me to imagine Jesus as King doesn't detract from understanding what he means in our lives today, here in 2018. In fact it may enhance it.

But he's a different kind of king. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, his Kingdom is not from this world. In the Tissot painting on the cover of the bulletin, Jesus is bound, standing before Pilate, a very vulnerable, unthreatening sort of King. He was not trying to be King of Judea or of any part of the Roman Empire, but rather, King of our hearts and souls and minds. He is the one to whom we give our first loyalty. To whom we submit. To whom we pray every Sunday - "Thy Kingdom Come."

In fact, Jesus as King, is King above all Kings and all other temporal, earthly rulers. Which is not to put down Prime Ministers and Presidents, per say. After all Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. And to God the things that are God's." Substitute Justin Trudeau and Doug Ford and Bryan Paterson for Caesar and it brings it a little closer to home. Perhaps we could suggest to all of them and a certain President down south that they read and pay attention to the words of King David, the passage in 2nd Samuel 23 we heard in the Old Testament lesson this morning, those radiant words: "One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,

gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.” “Ruling in the fear of God” is a pretty good principle on which to govern, and it also means that God is above our earthly powers. They must submit to God and the people.

This may seem like an odd question here: but why is the Government of the Peoples Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, so afraid of Falun Gong? Because, as a spiritual and moral practise, it suggests a higher loyalty than that to the Chinese politburo and the whole party machine. In the same way, our loyalty to Jesus as King, is a higher loyalty than to any ruler on earth. And if we act on this loyalty to Jesus, then our rulers better pay attention.

So what does it mean to submit to Jesus, the King? What does it mean for us to give Jesus our loyalty? I think, in essence, it means that we always respond to that in our human nature which is best, and to repress that which is worst. Jesus calls us to rise above our worst instincts, to rise above our very animal selves. As his subjects we are called to love where we would hate; to heal where we would harm; to do justice where this is injustice; to forgive those who do us wrong; to be generous where we would be greedy; to care for others rather than just ourselves; to accept those who are not like us; to accept those who disagree with us; to be loyal to those we love and are responsible for no matter how challenging they can be; to be compassionate and not be judgemental about those whose mistakes have led them into terrible circumstances; to reconcile with those whom we've hurt; to face up to where we all too often have come short of the glory of God.

I had the perfect opportunity recently to be a strong witness to this loyalty,

and I blew it. I just blew it. I was out West having coffee with an old friend, a man who is very successful businessman and also a Christian. I was telling him about my volunteer work at Collins Bay prison here in Kingston, hosting a book club in the Maximum Security Unit there. I was telling my friend about the need for people like us to work for restorative justice in a very difficult situation. He was very critical of the way the prisons are being run, the bureaucratic system, the difficulty that good people have within the system to make a difference, the burnout rate among good people. In effect saying, right now it's kind of hopeless, why bother. None of this was news to me, but I countered with a political argument, talking about how the current Minister Ralph Goodale is the best man in the cabinet to be responsible for Correctional Services Canada, that he's given CSC a new mandate that is very idealistic and hopeful, even though we all know whatever change will come, will come very slowly and incrementally. Not that that was a wrong answer, but what I should have done is to ask my friend, Okay, What Would Jesus Do? What would Jesus have us do?

Because that is the question that takes us to the heart of what it means to be Christian. Because for most of us, we can probably figure out what that answer is. In our heart of hearts we know what Jesus would do. It's a very good question that can almost instantly stop and cut through a lot of prevaricating B.S. Talk that evades the truth. Jesus tells Pilate "I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice." So we, who are his subjects, belong to the truth. And we are called upon to act on what we know to be true, to follow the example Jesus in all that we do.

One of my inspirations, and I've mentioned him before, is Father Michael K Marsh, an Episcopal Priest in the diocese of West Texas, and whose blog "Interrupting the Silence" is very helpful to me as I study the Gospel of the Day. In one of his sermons on this Feast of Christ the King he says: If we truly mean "thy kingdom come" then we must also pray, "Our kingdom go." Our kingdom of power, domination, and greed must go. Our kingdom of violence and oppression must go. Our kingdom of fear, prejudice, and resentment must go. Our kingdom of judgment and labeling must go. Our kingdom of individualism and indifference to the other must go. We must stop defending the kingdom of status quo. The reign of Christ the King frees us to step outside the status quo and not just live in a new kingdom but to be and become a new kingdom – the Kingdom of God."

Or as the theologian Marcus Borg puts it: "The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were king."

There are many ways to imagine a relationship with our Lord: Servant, Friend, Comforting Presence, Inspiration, a Model of what it means to be Fully Human. But King works also, in the sense that we bow, we kneel, we submit, we park our egos as best we can.

Speaking personally, if Christ is my King then next time I hope I will have the courage and the presence of mind to ask my friend, "What would Jesus do? What would Jesus have ME do?"

Amen