

“The Son of Man”

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 • Psalm 93 • Revelation 1:4b-8 • John 18:33-37

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

November 24, 2024

Christ the King / Reign of Christ

Today is the last Sunday in the Christian year. We begin anew each year, four Sundays before Christmas, on the first Sunday of Advent; we always end around this time each year, with a Sunday that we call “Christ the King” or “the reign of Christ.” The point is to remind us that Christ reigns eternally in the heavens, and his kingdom shall have no end. Our stories about Jesus comes to an end, but *he* most definitely does not. Here in the United States, “Christ the King” or “the reign of Christ” Sunday always falls just before or just after Thanksgiving, but let’s remember that Thanksgiving is a *national* holiday, while “Christ the King” or “the reign of Christ” Sunday is observed by many groups of Christians all around the globe. So, today, let’s join with Christians around the world who are celebrating our Lord’s unending reign. The world is always in flux, but one thing *never* changes: *Jesus Christ is our King.*

The Gospel of John tells us of a conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman Governor of Judea for a period of about 10 years before, during, and after the ministry of Jesus. It was, of course, Pilate who handed Jesus over to be crucified, after Jesus ran afoul of the Jewish authorities, though the Gospels all suggest that Pilate was not convinced that Jesus had done anything deserving death. In all four of the Gospels, Pilate questions Jesus; in all four of the Gospels, Pilate specifically asks Jesus: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33) In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus answers the question enigmatically with the words, “You say so” – as if to say, “well, that’s what everyone is saying about me, and you seem to think that I’ve been making that claim, but I’m not going to come right out and say so myself.” In John, however, Jesus answers the question with another question. Pilate asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” and Jesus responds: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” In other words, Jesus is asking, “Pontius Pilate, do *you* think that I’m the king of the Jews?” Pilate answers: “I am not a Jew, am I?” No, he’s not a Jew. We don’t know *anything* about Pilate’s life before he became Governor of Judea, or even what part of the Roman Empire he originally came from; what we do know is that he was most definitely a Roman and not a Jew. If Jesus is claiming to be “King of the *Jews*,” then he wouldn’t be claiming to be *Pilate’s* king, since Pilate wasn’t a Jew – but at the same time, if Jesus is claiming to be “King of the Jews,” that could make him a potential *threat* to Pilate, as a political opponent. What if all the Jews were to hail Jesus as their King, and try to remove Pilate from power? That could be a problem for Pilate. Of course, the Romans held all the cards; they had the power; they had the wealth; they had the military might. Some Jews definitely wanted to rise up against their Roman overlords; a few Jews tried to do that and failed; the Roman military machine was just too strong. The legendary *Pax Romana* – the “Roman Peace” – wasn’t a peace forged from treaties and agreements and understandings; it was instead a peace brought about by brutal force and strength. You rebel – and you *die*. It was as simple as that.

So here these two men stand. One, a Roman Governor, with massive military and political power; the other, a Galilean carpenter with a lot of followers and who has generated a lot of internal controversy within Judaism. Pilate surely must have wondered, “Who does this guy think he is?” Pilate reminds Jesus of his place: “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me.” Which is to say, “If you think you’re the King of the Jews, Jesus, you’ve got a whole lot of your own people who are trying to take you down.” Pilate wonders how this could be. He asks Jesus: “What have you done?”

Jesus *could* have chosen to answer that question. He *could* have said, “I’ve healed a lot of people. I’ve cast out many demons. I’ve performed miracles. I’ve brought people back from the dead. I’ve forgiven people of their sins. I’ve re-interpreted the Jewish law. I’ve taught people about the Kingdom of God.” He could have given a summary of his three-year ministry; he could have told Pilate some specific stories. The wedding at Cana. The feeding of the five thousand. The raising of Lazarus. But no. Jesus chooses *not* to answer Pilate’s question. He chooses to take the conversation to a whole new level: “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Which is to say: “I’m not the king of the Jewish people. I *am* a king – but not an *earthly* king.” Pilate might be catching on: “So you *are* a king?” I wonder how Pilate said that – with awe and wonder (“So you *are* a king!”) – or with scorn and derision (“So you *are* a *king?!?*”). Either way, Jesus turns the question back on Pilate yet again: “You say that I am a king.” Jesus wants to know is what *Pilate* thinks and believes. Jesus is giving him an opportunity to – shall we say – *come to Jesus*.

“For this I was born,” says Jesus, “and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” Jesus has a *purpose*. His whole being, his whole identity, is wrapped up in that purpose. That purpose *isn’t* about earthly wealth and power and military might – all the things that Pilate possesses in abundance. That purpose is aimed towards something else entirely. Jesus continues: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” The question is – will *Pilate* listen to the voice of Jesus? The reading stopped here, but if you continue in the Gospel, the very next thing Pilate says is: “What is truth?” – which again could be read in different ways. Is it a genuine question – “what *is* truth?” – or is it a mockery – “*what is truth?*” Does Pilate believe that there is some deep, existential truth out there, to which Jesus is the witness? Do *you* believe that there is some deep, existential truth, to which Jesus is the witness?

It’s Christ the King Sunday. Christ reigns eternally in the heavens. He was never a Governor, like Pilate, or a King, or an Emperor. Not here on earth. Pilate’s reign would end, in the year 36. The Emperor’s reign would end, a year later. But *Christ’s* reign was just getting started. It continues to *this day* – and to the end of time. That doesn’t mean that the world lives in peace in the meantime. There are wars, famines, disasters both natural and man-made. There are interpersonal conflicts, domestic abuse, a whole lot of unnecessary violence. There’s cruelty and hate; disease and suffering and death. Just because Jesus reigns in heaven doesn’t mean the problems here have gone away. In the first epistle of John we are told, “the whole world lies under the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Christ reigns in heaven, but here on earth, evil still holds sway. The difference is that we have *hope*. The knowledge that Christ reigns in heaven gives us *confidence* that the dark times will not last forever. In time, Jesus *will* return and set *all things right*. Everything that is wrong with the world will, one day, be but a memory.

This is what the passages from Revelation and Daniel are affirming. The book of Revelation was written during a time of extreme darkness. John had been exiled to an island in the Aegean Sea;

Christians on the mainland were being persecuted, sometimes to death. In the midst of this despair John was given a vision, a vision which he was compelled to share with seven specific churches in what is now western Turkey, and from them to the rest of the world. “Look!” John exclaims. “He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.” Jesus, who reigns in heaven, *will come back*. This will be good news for some; not-so-good news for others. “Every eye will see him, *even those who pierced him*” – those who thrust their spear into Jesus’ side while he was hanging and dying on the cross. He *will* come back. For *all* of us.

This promise was nothing new. Daniel had said just as much, more than two centuries earlier. There are four visions in the book of Daniel. In the first vision, Daniel saw this: “As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.” That “Ancient One” is a representation of God; a literal translation would be “the Ancient of Days.” But at the same time don’t take the specifics too literally – God doesn’t have a body; God doesn’t wear clothes; God doesn’t have hair; there is no physical throne upon which God sits. This is all symbolic, all representational. God is beyond comprehension, yet Daniel beholds God in ways that Daniel can comprehend. Daniel also sees “a thousand thousands” serving God, “ten thousand times ten thousand” in the heavenly court attending God. Again, don’t take the numbers too literally; that’s not a precise number of people, but rather Daniel’s best attempt to express the vast multitude of faithful he was beholding in God’s realm.

Then Daniel sees someone else: “I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.” Literally, that “one like a human being” is “one like the Son of Man.” You may recognize that phrase “Son of Man;” it is the title that Jesus uses to refer to himself, about 80 times in the Gospels: “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6); “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering” (Mark 8:31); “the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5) – those are just three examples out of dozens. Here in the book of Daniel, the phrase means that Daniel beheld somebody who *looked like a son of a man*, in other words, *someone who looked human*, which is why a number of translations render it as “one like a human being,” or something similar to that. The phrase “Son of Man” wasn’t a formal title yet when the book of Daniel was written, but it *became* a formal title later on, a title which Jesus claimed for himself. Jesus was saying, “Hey, *I’m* the one that Daniel saw in his first vision.” And what *did* Daniel see? Here’s the whole thing: “I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” Daniel, in his vision, saw *somebody who looked human* coming “with the clouds of heaven” to Almighty God – and God gave this “somebody who looked human” dominion, glory, and kingship over *everything*. It’s an everlasting dominion, and an unbreakable kingdom. To be clear: *Daniel saw Jesus*. Daniel saw God give *Jesus* power and dominion over all things. Daniel didn’t have a *name* for Jesus – that would come centuries later – but Daniel grasped the *truth* of Jesus. He grasped the truth that *Christ reigns over all things* and for *all time*. He grasped the truth that Christ is *King of kings and Lord of lords*. He grasped the truth that *Christ* would be the one whom we worship and serve. Daniel grasped the truth that *we all need to grasp: Jesus Christ is our King*, always and forever. No matter what evil or suffering may ever come our way, *we have a King* who will one day come to set all things right. Thanks be to God!

© 2024 Rev. Bill Pinches