

A Pause Between ‘Black Friday’ and ‘Cyber Monday’

2 Samuel 23:1-7; John 18:33-37

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You may not know it, but today is the culmination of a journey. We call this day Christ the King Sunday. This is the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar, the church year, and it marks the culmination of a yearlong journey through the life of Jesus. The journey begins each year on Advent Sunday when we begin to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth. The journey then takes us from the manger to the dusty hillsides of Galilee. This year we’ve watched Jesus have confrontations with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. We’ve watched him heal a woman who was ill for twelve years and raise to life the little daughter of a man named Jairus. We listened as he told his disciples over and over that he must go to Jerusalem. There he said he would be handed over to the authorities, beaten, condemned, and crucified. Then on the third day he would rise again. We walked with him through those last days, his crucifixion, and then celebrated his resurrection. Today this yearlong journey ends with an acknowledgement of his eternal kingship.

Christ the King Sunday is a late addition to the liturgical calendar. It was started in 1925. It was a time when the church’s influence in the world was waning. Cultures were growing more secular. Dictatorships were on the rise in Europe, especially in Italy where Mussolini led the National Fascist Party from 1922 until he was ousted in 1943. Christ the King Sunday was the church’s reminder to the world that earthly rulers, powerful though they may appear to be, come and go. Christ will rule forever. So this day is an invitation to allow Christ to rule in our hearts, minds, wills and bodies today and every day.

The text for Christ the King Sunday is a courtroom scene. This occurred near the end of Jesus’ life. He was before his judge, Pilate, the Roman governor. Since the Jewish leaders could not legally execute a death sentence, they handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities, who could. Pilate was confused about the kind of king Jesus was. Granted, Jesus was not the typical kind of king: born in a manger, no place to call home, no army, and no royal court. He would wear a crown, but it would be a crown made of thorns.

Let me say a word about Pilate. There was no love lost between Pilate and the leaders of the Jews. A couple of incidents occurred that embarrassed Pilate and flamed hatred between him and the Jewish leaders. The first incident occurred on his first visit to Jerusalem. He arrived in Jerusalem with a detachment of soldiers. The soldiers carried a standard with a bust of the emperor on top. The emperor was considered a god, which was blasphemy to the Jews. The bust was considered to be a graven image, and the Jewish leaders demanded that it be removed. Pilate refused. He returned to his palace in Caesarea, thinking that he could simply leave the confrontation behind. However, a group of Jewish leaders followed him to Caesarea and for the next five days humbly insisted that the busts of the emperor be removed. Thoroughly frustrated, Pilate finally told them to meet him in the amphitheater. When they arrived, Pilate surrounded them with armed soldiers and told them that if they didn't quit harassing him they all would be killed. But here's what happened. The Jewish leaders, refusing to compromise, bared their necks and invited his soldiers to strike. The Jewish leaders were unarmed. It would be an inhumane massacre and a political disaster for Pilate. He was beaten. He finally agreed to remove the busts from the standards.

Another incident. The water supply in Jerusalem was inadequate. Pilate wanted to build a new aqueduct but didn't have the funding to do so. So he raided the Temple treasury. Of course, the people of Israel resented this greatly. They rioted in the streets. To stop the rioting, Pilate mingled his soldiers in plain clothes with the rioters. At a given signal, the soldiers attacked the mob, and many Jews were clubbed or stabbed to death. The people of Israel hated Pilate (Wm. Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, pp. 238-239).

That's part of what makes this courtroom scene so ironic. The Jewish leaders may have hated Pilate, but they also needed him. They needed him to do what they legally could not do: get rid of Jesus once and for all. Politics makes strange bedfellows, indeed.

Pilate demanded to know if the charge against Jesus was true, "Are you the King of the Jews?" That is what the Jewish leaders charged, that he claimed to be a king. That was a serious charge. It could mean that Jesus was an insurrectionist. Maybe a member of that dangerous sect called the Zealots. Was Jesus dangerous, a threat to the king? Pilate had to find out.

As is typical of Jesus in John's gospel, Jesus answered Pilate's question with a question, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus knew what was happening. Jesus knew that he had been set-up by the Jewish leaders. Let me paraphrase that question of Jesus. I think he was asking Pilate something like this: "Did you come to this conclusion on your own, or did the Jewish leaders, who hate you, put you up to this?"

William Barclay, the old Scottish New Testament theologian, believed that Pilate was being blackmailed into crucifying Jesus. People he hated and who hated him were blackmailing him into killing an innocent man (Ibid., p. 240). Oh, what a web we weave!

"I am not a Jew, am I?" Pilate contemptuously answered Jesus. Then he demanded to know of Jesus, "What have you done?"

Here's how *The Message* translates this verse:

Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?

So Jesus tried to explain the unexplainable. He told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. Why, his followers didn't even fight to prevent him from being arrested. He had no army. His kingdom was not defined by earthly standards.

Pilate jumped back in, "So you are a king?" Gotcha! He thought he had Jesus trapped. Instead, he set up an occasion for Jesus to make an important statement about his purpose. Why was he born? Why did Jesus live among us so long ago? Here's what he told Pilate:

You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

So why was Jesus born? Why did he come into the world? Jesus came to testify to, to witness to, the truth. I'm convinced that this is an important statement. What did Jesus mean by this? What is truth?

Here's what I think. Jesus came to help the world discover who God is. The truth. He came to tell us that God is not some little toy that we can

manipulate to make us feel better. God is not a mean, selfish deity that metes out punishment if we don't follow his way to the letter. He said that God didn't even care about their sacrifices at the temple. What God does care about are the sacrifices of our hearts. God cares about the way we treat others. God cares about the integrity of our lives, that we really are what we claim to be, that we genuinely allow our beliefs to shape us. Sometimes the picture of God gets so blurred that someone has to come along and redraw it, reveal the truth. That's what Jesus did. He redrew the picture of God. He testified to the truth. That's why he was born. That's why he came into the world.

So today is a reminder of that. It a pause between the rush of "black Friday" and the lure of "cyber Monday" in order to see something eternal. All the purchases we make, all the packages, are temporal. They will soon break, become obsolete, or we'll outgrow them. Today we see something eternal, a kingdom that knows no end, a King of Love, a King of Grace, a King of Hope, a fresh picture of who God is.

That's what Christ the King Sunday is about. It is a reminder to you, me, the world, that President Trump, Governor Ivey, Mayor Battle, and all the earthly rulers, powerful though they appear to be, come and go. Our Christ will rule forever. So hear the invitation of this last Sunday of the year. Allow Christ to reign in your heart, your mind, your will, your life today and every day.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we have paused between "black Friday" and "cyber Monday." We take a breath and listen for sounds of a realm not of this world. We listen for the call of truth. Help us to hear and follow. Amen.