

Christ the King (B/RCL): Pilate, Christ, King Christian X, Herr Duckwitz and Us  
Revelation 1: 4b-8  
John 18:33-37  
November 24-25, 2018

Christ the King -- the last weekend of the church year -- the hinge of the door that opens onto Advent. Some say that "king" is an outmoded image, a metaphor that doesn't work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. But we have **some** exposure to kings! Current and past.... Who comes to mind?

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- Pharaohs as king of Egypt.... Mostly thumbs up or thumbs down?
- King of Saudi Arabia.... Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (although his heir apparent, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, is more in the news these days, first because he allowed Saudi women to drive, and more recently because of his fairly obvious involvement in the murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Kashoggi).
- King George III, king of Great Britain and Ireland, during the Revolutionary War.... Mostly thumbs up or thumbs down? (Flawed decisions re. taxation without representation....)
- King David – shepherd boy, slayer of Goliath, risen to greatest of kings of Israel? Adulterer and murderer, too....

The people of Israel had an uneasy history with kings.... The prophet Samuel said that the King of Israel was the Lord God. But the Israelites wanted to be like everyone else; they didn't just want judges, they wanted kings like all the surrounding nations! Finally the Lord said, "I'll give you kings, all right.... Be careful what you pray for." Saul suffered from crushing depression, terrible paranoia, and killed himself. David did better, but not great. Solomon got really mixed reviews, but despite his proverbial wisdom, he married pagan women, conscripted Israelite men into the army, and made some other bad moves.... King Ahab married Jezebel (BIG mistake!)... and on and on it goes. King Hoshea was the last king of the northern kingdom of Israel when the Assyrians invaded and Zekediah was the last king of the southern kingdom of Judah when the Babylonians invaded. Have you ever even heard of either of them??

The sign over Jesus' head as He was hanging on the cross said, "Jesus of Nazareth, **the King of the Jews.**" It was written in 3 languages so the reason for his execution would be clear to everyone. Pilate didn't **believe** Jesus was guilty of "sedition," treason against Caesar, against the empire of Rome. But he

wasn't going to risk a riot among the Jews in Jerusalem at Passover, either, a tense time in the best of circumstances. He was already on Rome's radar as a possibly problematic employee of the state, so the religious leaders pushed the panic button in his psyche when they said, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself **against** the emperor." (John 19:12)

"Are you **the King of the Jews?**" In St. Matthew's Gospel the wise men from the East travel to Jerusalem and ask everyone they meet, "Where is the child who has been born **king of the Jews?**" (Matt. 2:2) Word of their inquiry gets back to **King** Herod (the father of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded and whom Jesus called "that sly fox"). Herod is **frightened** by the prophecy of **another, legit** King to be born in Bethlehem, and orders the slaughter of the innocents to eliminate the competition. One of the gifts the Magi bear and offer to the Child is gold: a present fit for a **king**. In St. John's Gospel, after Jesus feeds the 5,000-plus, the people decide they can count on **not** being hungry with Him around.

*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him **king**, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15)*

Jesus knew He wasn't the kind of king the people had in mind. He wasn't going to be a military leader raising an army and overthrowing Roman occupation. He wasn't going to offer them bread and circuses. He was going to lead in love. He wasn't going to "lord it over them." He was going to be their servant Lord. He was never going to sit on a earthly throne. He was going to be enthroned on the cross, then reign from on high. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32)

Bibles that have subject headings may label the part of the Gospel we heard today "Jesus Before Pilate" or something similar. But "Pilate Before Jesus" would be just as accurate. Is it really Jesus who's on trial or Pilate? Jesus is the calm One. His answers surprise, even befuddle Pilate, making him nervous. Three times Pilate says to the religious leaders, "I find no case against him." (John 18:38, John 19:4, 6) Pilate asks Jesus:

*"Where are you from?" But Jesus gave no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...." (John 19:9-11)*

Pilate is powerless under the pressure exerted by the chief priests and elders. Jesus is powerful, even regal –

*"No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:18)*

To the extent that a world leader takes a courageous, compassionate stance toward the vulnerable, often voiceless ones Jesus calls *"the least of these who are members of my family"* (Matt. 25:40), that leader is Christ-like and a faithful witness to the one our reading from Revelation calls *"the ruler of the kings of the earth."* (Revelation 1:5) When I was rooting around in my brain for faith-filled kings, I thought of King Christian X (the Tenth) of Denmark. I remembered a story about him and the people of Denmark all wearing yellow stars during WW II so that the Jews in their midst couldn't be singled out and deported to concentration camps. I checked my go-to reference, *The Righteous*, and read about the 8,000 lives the king and people of Denmark saved, but found nothing about the yellow star. So I Googled it ☺ -- and learned that neither Jews nor Gentiles in Denmark wore yellow stars. That was a legend that sprang up because of the incredible solidarity of King Christian and his Danish subjects when it came to safeguarding the Jews who were their fellow citizens.

The King, the Parliament, the police, the pastors, the people, social and financial institutions were on the same page that they should be protected. The police prevented the Nazis from entering homes to round up Jews. The clergy spoke from the pulpit, exhorting their parishioners to do whatever was necessary to save the Jews. Universities took a weeklong break so students could help with the Resistance. A courageous German diplomat, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, who had been sent to Denmark by German military intelligence, found out about the planned deportation of Danish Jews and warned the Swedish and Danish governments. Over the course of 3 weeks the Danish Navy and whatever fishermen were willing and able ferried thousands of Jews across the narrow body of water that separates Denmark from Sweden, which had remained neutral and was a safe haven. During that time the Resistance also

smuggled others over the land border. In total, about 8,000 Jews and their partially Jewish relatives were whisked to safety, including Niels Bohr, the physicist who later emigrated to the U.S. When the Nazis came to round up the Danish Jews, they found only about 500 left. They were transported to Theresienstadt. Because of the insistence of the Danish government that they be well cared for, because of frequent site visits by the Danish Red Cross, because of the care packages sent by the Danish to the camp, 423 out of 500 Danish Jews survived the camp: more than 8 out of 10, compared to a survival rate of close to 0 for the others who were sent to Theresienstadt and died of hunger or who were sent on to Auschwitz and exterminated.<sup>1</sup>

One historian has written:

“The Danish people’s resolute refusal to discriminate against their fellow Jewish citizens and to surrender them, or the refugees among them, to the Germans; the rescue launched to transfer the Jews to a safe haven in Sweden; and the unwavering support and protection they gave to the Theresienstadt deportees – all represent an exercise of high moral and political responsibility, outstanding and exceptional for the time in which it took place.”<sup>2</sup>

Or for **any** time. The king whose name was Christian made a difference. He led in love. But his people also acted in love. Another historian said:

...that even the King would not have agreed to stand up to German pressure ‘without the swell of public opinion against the deportation, and without the intervention of many around him.’ ... [T]he people were opposed to the anti-Semitic measures, but a community is powerless without leaders, without those individuals within its midst who exercise public responsibility – in this case the ...deputies, the politicians who are ready to accept the risks that their actions entailed. All this was necessary for good to triumph, in a certain place and at a certain time; any break in the chain and their efforts might well have failed. It seems that, once introduced into public life, evil easily perpetuates itself, whereas good is always difficult, rare, and fragile. And yet possible.<sup>3</sup>

And yet possible. “Father in heaven, **Thy kingdom come**, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

“Thy kingdom come” – not just **to** us, but **through** us, by Your Holy Spirit’s power and to the honor of Christ the King. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* ( NY: Henry Holt, 2003). 258-259.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 259. Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust*, p. 706.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 437. Tzvetan Todorov (editor), *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria’s Jews Survived the Holocaust*, p. 40.