John 18:33-37

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from 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.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “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.”

Today is the last Sunday of the church year and is called: “Christ the King Sunday.” It is the bookend to the story of Jesus we have heard all year. Next Sunday we begin Advent and the story begins again.

Today is set aside for proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the King of Kings, the ruler of all Creation.

Christian music and art down through the centuries are filled with depictions of Christ the King, wearing long flowing white robes, sitting on his throne, scepter in one hand, sword on the other, surrounded by seraphims and cherubims.

If you don’t know what seraphims and cherubims are, they are angel-y things with wings.

This imagery of Jesus, the monarch, also rings through our prayer book. One of our Eucharistic prayer even implores God to “put all things in subjection under your Christ.”

Into this cascade of imagery comes one more image of Christ the King today, from the Revelation of John – commonly, and incorrectly, called “the Book Revelations” – wherein Jesus hovers above us as an ethereal king quite disconnected from us.

“Look! He is coming with the clouds,” this biblical text declares.

Yet we are also confronted today with another biblical image that sounds contrary to these declarations of grandeur.
This image comes in the story of Jesus being interrogated by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who mockingly asks Jesus if he is the “King of the Jews.”

Jesus deflects the question – “If you say so” – and then Jesus mocks Pilate, telling him his kingdom “is not of this world.”

Pilate hears enough, and quickly dispatches Jesus, the king of the Jews, to the Roman executioners to be tortured and hung on the Cross.

There is little question in this story about who is the king with power over life and death – and it isn’t Jesus.

So what kind of king is this Jesus?

Let’s back up a little. I must admit that I have hard time reconciling Jesus, a Jewish holy man of modest origins, with being an omniscient, almighty monarch.

I am far more comfortable with Jesus the good shepherd than Jesus the warrior descending from the clouds.

And I know I am not alone in this.

Many churches have taken to calling this “Reign of God Sunday,” which is perhaps a little better, but which still has overtones of the omniscient, almighty ruler from on high.

And we are still faced with this question: if Jesus is the triumphant king of kings, ruler of rulers, what is he doing on the Cross?

Perhaps it is our concept of human kingship that is off. Perhaps we are looking through the wrong lens.

This king – Christ the king – has nothing to do with our conventional human ideas of politics and power, prestige and status.

This king – Christ the king – turns all of those conventional human values upside down.

I would suggest to you: It is the Cross that defines that his kingship. Christ Jesus defines his kingship by walking with us, down here, in the trenches of life, not up there on a throne.

Elsewhere in the gospels, we hear how “Jesus weeps” at the tomb of Lazarus.

This is our king, the one who weeps with us, the one who is here with us in the muck of life, not up there in the clouds.

And we hear in the gospels how Jesus calls out the powerful for their greed and hypocrisy, whether they have political power or religious power.

By so doing, Christ the King challenges us to live into the values of a very different kind of kingdom than those ruled by greed, violence and brutality.
He asks us to shift from a kingdom that values conflict, to a kingdom that values kindness.

He asks us to shift from a kingdom that values vengeance, to a kingdom that values forgiveness.

He asks us to shift from a kingdom that values self-interest, to a kingdom that sees everyone as children of God – even our enemies.

He asks us to shift from a kingdom that treats people as cheap commodities, to a kingdom that cares for the sick, the poor, the outcasts, the needy, the refugees.

And he asks us to do more than that. He asks us to confront and change the systems that neglect the sick, exploit the poor, create homelessness and cause people to flee for their lives from dictators and wars.

He especially asks us to join him by building a kingdom where we are the peacemakers, and we are pastors to each other and everyone around us. “Blessed are the peacemakers.” That would be all of us.

If you feel this is a stretch, it was a stretch for his first followers. They kept expecting he would show up as the king of grandeur. But he didn’t. They felt everything Jesus asked of them was beyond anything they felt capable of doing.

But they followed Jesus anyway, bringing with them all their flaws and all their strengths, even strengths they didn’t know that had.

Jesus took them to uncomfortable places. He taught, he healed, and he worked with his hands. He enjoyed a good meal, and he could spin a yarn and tell jokes.

But he could also be harsh with his followers. He did not shy away from telling them about the gritty realities of the world – and the commitment it takes to be his disciple:

Feed the hungry in body, mind and soul. Heal the sick, turn the other cheek, pray for your enemies, forgive each other, share your possessions with the poor and needy. Change the world that makes them poor and needy.

He was captured and crucified. And then he rose from the dead to show that not even death has power over him, or over us. He rose from the dead to show us how to live.

This way of living is not up in the clouds, but down here, in this time and this place. We can live this way every day, one step at a time. We can live this way one act of kindness at a time, one act of generosity at a time, one act of forgiveness at a time.

Compassion, salvation, forgiveness, and the light of truth shining into the shadows – this is the moral compass of the king we follow.
And this is truly what makes Christ the King, the king of kings.
AMEN.