

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 24, 2024

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## Jesus is Lord

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I dearly wish our Gospel reading for today continued on for one more verse. I understand why it doesn't, but I think it's a missed opportunity. Today is Christ the King Sunday, or sometimes, Reign of Christ Sunday. This is actually a relatively young festival in the life of the church. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in the encyclical *Quas primas*<sup>1</sup>. This encyclical was written in the aftermath of WWI and the revolutions of 1917-1923CE and in it the Pope argues that Christ alone should be our King. Now, unfortunately, that encyclical is couched in the sort of language designed to provide the church and church leadership as something of a regent for Christ the King. But as I pointed out in my sermon on the Widow's Offering, Jesus is very critical of systems, especially religious ones, that take advantage of the vulnerable and marginalized. A charge that is easy to prove against the church.

For as problematic as this encyclical is, Pope Pius got one thing very right. He links the Kingship of Christ with Christ's own self-disclosure in the Gospels, particularly Christ's self-revelation as being **the Truth**. And this is why I wish the Gospel kept going one more verse: Christ's Kingship is entirely defined by his identity as the Truth. Our Gospel reading today ended with "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.'"<sup>2</sup> And the very next verse sets up the main difference between human kings and Christ the King: "Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'"<sup>3</sup>

What do you think Pilate meant by that question? Is it a philosophical question? Does Pilate wish to debate Jesus about high-minded ideals? No, of course not. The literary context makes it clear that Jesus is a headache that Pilate does not want. The belligerent Hebrews are stirring up trouble for this poor Roman governor again. The

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_11121925\\_quas-primas.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html)

<sup>2</sup> John 18:37 (NRSVUE)

<sup>3</sup> John 18:38 (NRSVUE)

first question he asks Jesus is “Are you the King of the Jews?”<sup>4</sup> Or, put another way, “what sort of threat are you to my rule?”

What is truth for Pilate? It’s a bunch of religious fanatics attacking one of their own and dragging him into it. It’s wondering if this Jesus fellow has a terrorist cell waiting some place to attempt a rescue. It’s calculating the relative strength of the Roman garrison against the crowds in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. It weighing the cost of crucifying this Jesus versus the cost of letting him go.

Jesus tries to speak to him, meet him where he’s at...which is trapped in fear for his power and influence. Jesus reassures him, “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.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus is articulating a new authority, one that he’s been preaching and teaching for some time in John now.<sup>6</sup> This authority does not require violence the way most human authority does. It doesn’t require violence because it has the truth.

My sermon title today is widely considered to be the very first creedal statement made by the early church: “Jesus is Lord.” Now, in our current context this doesn’t seem like that big a deal; but back in the life of the early church, it was. You see, by confessing that “Jesus is Lord” a person is confessing that the emperor is **not**. “Jesus is Lord” means the Roman Empire is **not**. Saying and truly meaning that “Jesus is Lord” means that all the other authorities clamoring for your allegiance are **not**! And most of those authorities will be none too pleased with that.

This certainly means we need to be careful about saying “Jesus is Lord.” Especially if we really mean it! Now, back to why I wish our Gospel text went one more verse. If we do truly wish to mean that “Jesus is Lord” we need to explore what Jesus says that means. And in our reading today the invitation could not be more clear. If we mean that “Jesus is Lord” than we are people of the Truth. The truth that God is the source of all that was, is, and will be. And the truth that God created the world, called it good, and ordered it in healthy and communal ways. The truth is also that human willfulness and self-idolatry has meant that the world (and humanity) does not enjoy the life we were intended for. And in order to make our way back to the life we were created for, we need to follow the Way of Christ.

The Way of Christ which speaks truth to power. The Way of Christ that advocates for justice and peace. The Way of Christ which does not resort of violence against others.

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<sup>4</sup> John 18:33c (NRSVUE)

<sup>5</sup> John 18:36b (NRSVUE)

<sup>6</sup> E.g. John 3:14-15; John 12:23-25; John 13:1-16

The Way of Christ that will flip over the tables of moneylenders. The Way of Christ which invites “anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.”<sup>7</sup> The Way of Christ which calls us to meet people where they are and serve their needs. The Way of Christ, full of grace upon grace and God’s abundant blessings. The Way of Christ which is a way of compassion and love. The Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross, which also means calling a thing what it is.<sup>8</sup>

The ELCA’s Conference of Bishops met in late September and issued a statement on October 1<sup>st</sup> on the need to speak the truth. This statement saw the 67 Bishops of the ELCA speaking “with one voice to condemn the hateful, deceptive, violent speech that has too readily found a place in our national discourse.”<sup>9</sup> It goes on: “We lament the ways this language has led to hate-fueled action. We refuse to accept the ongoing normalization of lies and deceit. We recommit ourselves to speaking the truth and pointing to the one who is truth. We find courage in our collegiality and implore the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as our partners and friends, to join us as we:

- Pledge to be vigilant guardians of truth, refusing to perpetuate lies or half-truths that further corrode the fabric of our society.
- Commit to rigorous fact-checking, honoring God's command to "test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- Reject the use of humor that normalizes falsehood, remembering that our speech should "always be gracious" (Colossians 4:6).
- Boldly advocate for the marginalized and oppressed, emulating Christ's love for the least among us.
- Courageously interrupt hate speech, standing firm in the knowledge that all are created in God's image.
- Lean in with curiosity, engage with those who think differently and "put the best construction on our neighbor's action" (Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment).
- Amplify voices of truth.”<sup>10</sup>

A powerful statement on truth, our need to be grounded in truth and to be advocates for it as well. We who wish to claim that “Jesus is Lord” need to take seriously what that means for how we try to live our lives. We who wish to mean it when we say “Jesus is Lord” must wrestle with what that means is **not** our lord. Can we let go of the deceptions we hold dear for ideological purposes? Can we acknowledge the difficult

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<sup>7</sup> John 8:7b

<sup>8</sup> Luther, Martin. Heidelberg Disputation Thesis 21. 1518CE

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.elca.org/news-and-events/8247>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

truths of the systems we currently benefit so much from? And those that same system grinds to dust? Can we face that truth?

Can we face the truth of rising fascism around the globe as a means of coping with a world on fire? Can we face the truth of wars and genocide conducted in our names? Can we name the hard truths about ourselves too? Face the truth of our brokenness and our self-sabotaging behaviors? Or the truth of how easy it is for us to hurt and harm others and creation without even realizing or acknowledging it?

This is a heavy sermon. And I think it should be. Claiming that Christ is our King should **mean** something. Wanting Christ to rule us should impact how we live our lives. But here's the thing...living as we were created to live, in healthy and loving community...is a joy! Does not the thought of the peaceable Kingdom where the lion and the lamb coexist together, where war and violence are no more, and heartache and fear have been banished. Doesn't that Kingdom sound worth working for? Living towards?

It is long established wisdom that maturation often occurs as a result of suffering. A corollary to that statement is this: the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off. Christ the King is our Truth. The reality of that will likely anger you, because it means you can't live in the easy and selfish ways the world offers. It means you have to care for others...even others you don't know and will never meet. It means wanting a better life for factory workers in China, underaged cobalt miners in the Congo, women and children in Gaza. It means speaking out against racist and transphobic jokes and narratives. It can mean confronting entrenched powers. It can even mean death.

Saying "Jesus is Lord" is bad enough, but in a few minutes, we're going to make it even worse! We will soon pray the Lord's prayer; that dangerous, truthful prayer which includes these statements: "Your Kingdom come. Your will be done. As earth as in heaven." Are you sure you want to say them? Are you sure you want to say "Jesus is Lord"? It could get you in trouble. Though hopefully its "good trouble" as the late Rep. John Lewis encouraged. Amen.