

Christ the King Sunday – 2024
Last Sunday of the Church Year
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
Revelation 1:4-8
John 18:33-37

Pontius Pilate had Jesus flogged. It is humiliating to be flogged. It is a cruel act of torture that is intended to break the spirit of the one who suffers this beating, this whipping. Pontius Pilate had Jesus flogged. The Roman soldiers mocked him, twisting together a crown of thorns and putting it on the Lord's head, draping Him with a purple robe. The King of Creation endured this humiliation. Life is His possession. Life is His gift and the Lord of Life allowed Himself to be painfully beaten, scornfully berated, and shamefully humiliated. All of the beauty of man's composition is owed to Him, the God who breathed into man the breath of life, and those who were made in His image flogged Him, spit on Him, and mocked Him. The Gospel writers present this mind-spinning irony to us and our hearts are put in a theological vise. The Roman soldiers "came up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and struck him with their hands" (John 19:3).

Pontius Pilate had Jesus flogged. The Lord Christ's flesh was horribly torn, mangled. He was bleeding, an object of ridicule, and Pilate presented the incarnate God before the Jewish assembly and said these words: "Behold, your king" (John 19:14). It was a mean-spirited jab at the Jews, a taunt that came from a man who was spiritually blind, a man who had no use for the truth. Shortly before, the assembly had threatened Pilate: "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar" (John 19:12). Now the assembly cries for more than mere flogging. "They cried out, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.' So he delivered him over to them to be crucified" (John 19:15-16). For those of us who love the Lord, this episode is shocking. The vocabulary of the account in John's Gospel is unmistakable – this is how God establishes His kingdom. It is in being crucified that the Savior ushers in His kingdom. The King is inaugurated on a cross and He suffers, He dies. Death is Christ's coronation. The irony is mind-spinning.

Christianity is different. This kingdom is different. This King is different. Grace – receiving something you don't deserve, God's grace, God's love, God's forgiveness – grace is this King's currency. The greatest serves the least – that is this King's unwavering protocol. Searching out the least, the last, the forgotten and the marginalized and giving them the best seat at His banquet – that is this King's passion. Humility brings exaltation, shame brings glory, and death brings life – this kingdom is different. One of our own has died this week. A young man, a good man, husband, father, recently retired policeman, former school board chairman – Joe Belli, an affable, gentle soul, a servant of Christ the King, a public servant, a model of faithful decorum, a beloved son of our Father – Joe has finished his race. It was less than a year between the discovery of his cancer and the end of his battle. Our hearts go out to Andrea, Jilian, and Ava. I'm happy for Joe. I know what Joe has. I am very sad for Joe's family. I'm sure that the family has been in a fog for the last six months, seeking God's face, imploring His favor, trust being tempered by worry and dread. This life can be a slog. Pain, unexpected calamity, enemies breathing their threats – death is frequently untimely and frequently messy.

Christ established His kingdom. It is not of this world. Pilate looked at Jesus and was incredulous. *You are the king of the Jews?* Clearly, Jesus was not a threat to Pilate's political authority. What Pilate didn't know is that Jesus was and is this world's King in the fullest sense of the word. The Messiah who looks so unimpressive is the King of kings and the Lord of lords – His kingdom is eternal, His authority is everlasting. The Lord has taught you to pray "Thy kingdom come." How often have those words been a balm to your soul? You pray it in faith, don't you? You pray it knowing that God's kingdom has come plowing into this world, into your spirit. What defense do you have against pain, against loss, against death? Behold, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation (Zechariah 9:9). So said the prophet; so said the pilgrims to Jerusalem as Jesus rode in on a donkey; so say we as we are gathered in His name, in need of what He, and He alone, provides.

This King is different. He is not bound by time and space. His kingdom is not of this world. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). St. Paul wrote that. That verse comes from the great resurrection chapter of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus' kingdom is a heavenly reality. It is not *of* this world but it certainly breaks *into* this world. Your heart has burned with His glory as you hear His Word. That is His kingdom breaking in. You have seen baptism after baptism, sinners being reborn into Christ, grafted into His death and resurrection. That is His kingdom breaking in. You have tasted of His kingdom in the banquet of forgiveness that restores your soul. That is His kingdom breaking in. We are unworthy of His kingdom and yet that is precisely where He wants us, where He brings us, where we luxuriate in what it means to be different, to be loved, to be holy.

I am older than most of you. I never thought that I'd say that – but it's true. Some of you are older than me – good for you. What I'm about to say is probably going to be easier for the older crew to understand. We don't look back. Spiritually, we don't look back. "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14). Heaven is our home. We press on toward our goal. To be sure, we look back to Christ's life, a historical life, a life lived in time. We fondly recall our childhood, our rites of passage, the events that have made our lives sweet, but we press on toward the goal. Christ's kingdom breaks into this world but the fullness of it awaits us in heaven. Joe is there. The man I knew, the man I loved, the man I can picture with the clarity of the sharpest photograph is in Christ's presence. Jesus brought His kingdom to bear on Joseph Belli. Jesus destroyed death by dying. His kingdom was inaugurated by the twin realities of Good Friday and Easter. Those realities were embedded in Joe's soul and they are embedded in you. We press forward, toward the goal to which Christ has called us heavenward. That is our defense – Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a Mighty Fortress, a bulwark against every enemy. We press forward.

We are to live lives worthy of God, who calls us into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Love, forgiveness, supporting one another in difficulty, avoiding the darkness that this world promotes, sitting at Christ's feet and receiving His gifts, treasuring His kingdom and boldly confessing where our hope is found; all this is a product of what Jesus said to Pilate on Good Friday: "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John

18:37). The truth is the Father is pleased to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32). The truth is the kingdom of God is in our midst (Luke 17:21). The truth is we have miles to go before we sleep. Each day is a gift but the real prize is at the end. Jesus promised to return and we eagerly await our Savior on the Last Day. But He enters this assembly as King. He enters this assembly as the One who serves (Luke 22:27). I see in my mind's eye Joe holding his hand up as he received the body of Christ here at our altar, saying "amen" as I placed the host in his fingers. The King served Joe here. The King has brought Joe home. Behold your King, crucified, risen and reigning – the King of Life, the King of heaven, the King of our beloved congregation – Christ the King. Behold your King! To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.