

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

## November 22, 2009 Christ the King Sunday

John 18: 33-37

### **Christ is King**

The history of how the church came to celebrate Christ the King Sunday is short but interesting. The Feast was created, with no prior tradition, in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in response to Mussolini's earthly dictatorship. Later Pius would go on to vehemently protest against both Communism and National Socialism as demeaning to human dignity and a violation of basic human rights.

It was also under this Pope that the Vatican became an independent state. Until this time the church was subject to the Roman government. He wrote that the Church is not "bound to one form of government more than to another, provided the Divine rights of God and of Christian consciences are safe," and he specifically referred to "various civil institutions, be they monarchic or republican, aristocratic or democratic."

([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_03061933\\_dilectissima-nobis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_03061933_dilectissima-nobis_en.html))

And so he lifted up Christ as King at a very important time and for a very important reason. Whether we live in 1920's Europe or 21<sup>st</sup> century America, to call Christ our King is a radical and counter-cultural thing to do. And it is an irony at the center of the reading we heard from John's gospel, the excerpt from the trial of Jesus before Pilate. And it is something we would do well to get our heads around if we want to know what we are doing when we pray prayers like "Your kingdom come," and "for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever, Amen."

When we look at this discussion between Jesus and Pilate, we realize quickly that if we are going to think of Jesus as a king we had better be clear that we are talking about a radically different model of kingship than what Pilate has in mind. Jesus and Pilate are almost talking past each other because they are talking about such different things.

Pilate, of course, is not showing the least interest in what kind of theology of power Jesus might hold. He simply wants to establish whether this man before him presents any threat to the stability of Roman rule in Israel. He is not particularly interested in guilt or innocence, right or wrong. Like most of his kind, Pilate would easily order the execution of an innocent man if it would help cool down any revolutionary fervor among the masses.

"My kingdom is not from this world," replies Jesus. "If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Jesus is operating out of such a different understanding of authority, that his answers sound evasive, "It is you that is trying to put the 'king' label on me. My job is to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And with that statement, the gauntlet is thrown down to Rome. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice, not yours, not Rome's, not Beacon Street's, not 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue's."

And just as Jesus both rejects the word 'king' and yet with the same breath speaks of his own 'kingdom', so we in the Church are using an ironic metaphor whenever we speak of Jesus as king. A metaphor is when we deliberately use the wrong word in order to reveal some deeper but less obvious truth. On the surface, "King" is not the right word for Jesus.

He deliberately fled whenever the crowds wanted to proclaim him king. He does not employ the infrastructure of a monarchy; he does not maintain palaces and royal staff, he does not proclaim the boundaries of a kingdom and establish military forces to defend them; he does not rule with an iron fist. The word "king," as it is understood in our political world, is clearly the wrong word for Jesus, and yet we continue to use it.

Because, in deliberately using this wrong word, we create this powerful metaphor which reveals a more profound truth. When we say that for us, Jesus is King, we are saying that for us, no one else is king. In saying that we belong to the Kingdom of Jesus, we are saying that we are not submissive citizens of any other kingdom. We are saying that Jesus and his agenda sets our agenda, and that we will not give unquestioning allegiance to any other authority.

We do not set out to be hostile or seditious towards the countries we live in, but neither are we willing to cooperate with them when they ask us to compromise the values of love and justice and hospitality to advance their own national interests and agendas. Our allegiance is to the King of Love whose kingdom is not defined by national boundaries.

Our allegiance is to the One who will go to the cross before he will sell out the truth. It is in the apparent foolishness of looking to Jesus who is mocked in a kangaroo court and strung up to die humiliating death, and naming him as our only king that the irony is writ large and our identity as a counter-cultural people is established beyond all doubt.

Here are stories of two men who in whose lives the kingship of Jesus reigned supreme:

The first story is about Dietrich Offeldt, and takes place right after World War II and the separation of East and West Berlin, just when the division of East and West was becoming painfully apparent. All his friends counseled him: "Dietrich, flee to West Berlin. It will be better for you, better for your family, better for your freedom, a better place to be a Christian. Don't remain in East Berlin. It is family suicide, spiritual suicide."

But Dietrich was one of the many thousands who chose to remain and live as a Christian under communism. He wrote in one of his letters,

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I have found that every Christian finds himself or herself in a particular circumstance, a particular time, a particular place in which they live out their discipleship. My circumstance is communism; my time is the Cold War; and my place is East Berlin. I chose to be a disciple here.

To survive, I found that I needed to make two decisions: first, to accept the task that God had placed before me; that is, to live as a Christian in a communist state. The easy thing would have been to run away, to run someplace that was less difficult. But an essential key to life is to accept the God-given task that God has placed right in front of you and not run away from it.

How about you? What is the task or tasks that God has placed in front of you? The challenge? The difficult duty? What is it that you want to run away from and not face? What is it that you

want to escape rather than handle? These are important questions for us. Are you taking on the task that God has placed in front of you?

Dietrich's letter continued: "The second choice is to raise my flag and show my colors, to let those around me know for sure that I am a Christian, that Christ rules my life." Dietrich went on to tell about how some Christian parents in East Germany advised their children to be cautious in revealing that they were Christians and that such children became tense and not free but slaves to the fear of being found out. Dietrich found it much easier to be up front, to let people know he was a Christian.

One day his school principal confronted him, "Mr. Offeldt, communism teaches that there is no God, that God is a figment of our imagination." To which Dietrich replied, "God is not the figment of my imagination. God created my imagination and yours." Up front, colors flying high.

Dietrich knew that he couldn't teach his beliefs in God at school, but he wanted his principal to know where he stood. ... How about you? Do you fly your colors? Do you let people around you at work or in your neighborhood or family clearly know that Christ is the ruler of your life, that you are more than just a mere church member and worship attendee?

The second story is about Eric Liddell, the character the 80's movie Chariots of Fire was based on. Eric lived in Scotland in the early 1900's and was a runner. He was also a devout Christian. Well along come the 1924 Olympics in Paris, for which he had been training for years. It was time for the trial heats, and they were scheduled for Sunday morning. But he couldn't run on Sunday morning since it violated his religious principles.

So what did he do? He decided not to run. But then the pressures came at him from every direction. Even the Prince of Wales put pressure on him, telling him he needed to run in order to honor his country. And he replied to the Prince of Wales: "God my King is greater than the king of England, Wales and Scotland. To honor God is more important than to honor the king of England."

So Sunday morning of the time trials came, and Eric was not at the track but inside the great cathedral of Notre Dame with its splendor of spiritual heights and spiritual spaces. He was at worship. As he left the cathedral, a friend asked a poignant question: "Any regrets, Eric?" His answer was a classic: "O yes, regrets. But not doubts!"

Yes, regrets that he didn't win the gold in the hundred meters. Regrets that he didn't taste the thrill of running against the best athletes in the world. Regrets, Yes. But not doubts. No doubts that he stood up for what was right. No doubts that he did the honorable thing. No doubts that he did what his heart told him to do.

So what does it mean for us to name Jesus King?

Remember Jesus is not a worldly king. His power is not from this world, nor is it meant to be exercised in the way that the world exercises power.

Jesus exercised his power by serving others, by forgiving others, by healing others, by giving to others, by sacrificing himself for others. His power is the power of truth, the power of faith, the power of hope, the power of love.

We gather here as subjects of no king but Jesus, whose reign is established in laying down his own life for the world.

We gather as citizens of a kingdom that recognizes no boundaries of race or nationality or gender or wealth or social class.

We gather, not as a people who think that because we were born in closer proximity to the world's riches we have a greater 'right' to consume them than those born on the other side of a line drawn on a map, but as a people who know that all resources, even our basic daily bread, are the gifts of a generous God, given for the benefit of all humanity.

And so a new feast is set in our calendar, which lifts up a delicious irony of a feast and confirms our faith in the One whose kingdom and power and glory are revealed in the unquenchable force of suffering love, now and forever.

Amen.