

Keeping Time Like a Christian Reign of Christ Sunday John 18

Grace and peace to you from our Triune God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

How Christians understand time is a fascinating question to a church nerd like me. And there are at least three answers to that question.

You have *historical time*: time runs in a straight line from beginning to end, from Big Bang to Big Freeze, from creation to the end of days. Historical time goes in only one direction and is often marked by singular events and people. There's only one King David in Biblical texts; there's only one Paul of Tarsus who was struck blind on the road to Damascus. But it's also true that historical time shapes our sense of our own narratives. You were born on such and such a date, and in November of 2024 you found yourself listening to a church service in Wisconsin, and so on.

And then liturgical churches like ours also observe *cyclical time*: every church year begins with four weeks of Advent, leading up to Christmas, and then Epiphany, leading rather quickly into Ash Wednesday and Lent, then 50 days of Easter, and then Pentecost and the looonnng season after Pentecost, ending with the feast of Christ the King or the Reign of Christ, which we mark today. As soon as we get there, end moves seamlessly into beginning again, and the whole story of human salvation is told anew.

And then, third and finally, Christians acknowledge *kairos*, or God's time. Simply stated, we believe that God, being infinite, eternal, and everywhere, is not bound by human rules around time but can occupy any and all points on a time line or time cycle however God chooses. When we sometimes talk about the already and not yet, that's an example of *kairos*. God is the alpha and the omega all at once.

All of these ways of keeping time show up in today's readings if you know where to look, mapped over one another and lending their own flavors to the way we read the text. And especially to the way we understand the Kingdom of God to operate.

The set-up is familiar. Jesus is on trial before Pilate, the governor of Judea under Emperor Tiberius. These events are historically attested beyond

simply the claims of scripture. It's part of a timeline that ties together sacred claims to worldly claims: "this really happened."

Jesus stands tied up in front of Pilate. Pilate asks him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" I have to read this in sarcasm font. Pilate isn't asking for information but, as he believes, twisting the knife. Some king you are. Your own people ratted you out.

But Jesus doesn't answer as expected, a servile prisoner who should be begging for mercy. He turns the tables. You, Pilate. Did you come to this conclusion by your own wits? Do you think maybe you're being used by the people you're supposed to be governing?

Pilate answers huffily, I am not a Jew, am I? I am not an immigrant. I am not a trans woman in the subway . . . or in Congress. This stuff is none of my concern; I'm just here keeping order. By the way, what did you do to rile up these folks? Is this something we need to investigate? Does it threaten the Empire?

Once again, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. He has in fact ruffled powerful feathers by unauthorized acts of healing and mercy and love. But rather than talking about what he's done, he talks about who he is. My Kingdom does not belong to this world. *Everything you think is true about how power is seized and maintained is not true of me.*

So what does it mean to say Jesus is king, and what does the Kingdom of God look like? In what way does it stand in contrast to other kingdoms and rulerships? And to what kind of kingdom is your allegiance?

We have in some sense been asking precisely these questions since Easter, and sifting scripture to determine the answers. Last week I said, "the Kingdom of God is not made of material things but intangible ones, justice and mercy and love and forgiveness." Maybe that can serve for now.

In fact, arguably the kingship of Jesus is shown most clearly and poignantly in his crucifixion, embodied in a self-sacrifice so powerful that it *overturned death itself*. The Kingdom of God is not a place but a mode of being, as Karoline Lewis says, one that appears whenever its values are embodied and witnessed to.

And yet we are so easily seduced into supporting other kinds of kingdoms, the ones that can boast such large buildings and such large stones. Or maybe we just acquiesce to kingdoms, knowing on some level that they don't "belong to the truth" but traffic in half-truths and false truths that play into our fears and insecurities. Maybe we count the cost of pointing out that the emperor has no clothes and decide that it's safer to pretend that he does. After all, we reason, look what happened to Jesus.

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In 1925, alarmed by the rise of ultra-nationalism in Germany and Italy, Pope Pius XI aimed to remind Christians that Jesus Christ is over all things, and that his rule is marked by power that does not look like temporal power: "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature."

The pope's creation of Christ the King Sunday (which is now also celebrated by Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others) exemplifies how liturgical time can also have a great deal to say about a particular historical moment, including our own.

So what is our role in bringing about the Kingdom of God? If Christ is ruler over all, do we carry any responsibility? Although longing for better things to come is certainly a feature of this end of the liturgical year, and the beginning of the next, when Jesus says, "my Kingdom is not of this world," I don't believe it means we ought just to wait quietly and hope for the best.

Micah 6:8 seems like a good place to start: "God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" We are all prone to worshipping worldly kingdoms of privilege and safety, proximity to power, and the self-regard that hides in our blind spots—or at least I know I am. Joy J Moore articulates the remedy this way: "I will live my life in submission to Jesus, regardless of how other people are living their lives."

But perhaps the most needful, and difficult, task for the moment is to belong to the truth, as Jesus says; to allow ourselves to be wholly claimed by the truth—living it, witnessing to it, embodying it. "What is truth?" Asks

Pilate. The truth is that God so loved the world and all that is in it, you and me and our worst enemies, that even God's only son, the Human Being, was not too much to give for its sake.

Rulers and empires come and go, and may even claim to represent the mind of God, but God alone is sovereign of all of history. As Daniel reports, "God's dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and God's kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." We look for signs of that Kingdom, not in palaces of gold, but in the lowliest of places: in the prisoner, beaten and bound; in the dissident, executed by the State; in a hayshed, giving birth by candlelight. Amen.