

“Not So You’d Notice”

The scene is a dark, rather dank hall. It is early morning, and the rays of the sun have not yet reached this part of the building. Everything is shadows covering shadows. There are some oil lamps lit, but their light is fragile, at best, and the flickering of the flames makes vision even more difficult. Into the blackness of this room strides the Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, agitated from having to confront yet another Jewish problem before the dawn’s rays have penetrated his antechamber. He is in a black mood befitting this black hall.

A prisoner is ushered in . . . This man has been awake for more than thirty-six hours by now. He has obviously been through an ordeal with his Jewish captors — the marks of beating and slapping are pronounced. Bound at the wrists, dirty, sweaty, and totally disheveled he stands before Pilate in silence. Pilate looks at him and wonders what the big deal is all about: *“The Jewish authorities certainly had their undies in a bunch about this guy. Well, let them squabble over their unending religious conflicts; it’s none of my business. But, they did bring a charge I must consider — a claim against the Emperor’s authority. From this mess? Look at him. He’s barely over five foot six. You could blow him away with a whisper. They’ve really beaten the starch out of him. Well, let’s get this over with. **Are you the King of the Jews?**”*

There is not much for which we can forgive Pontius Pilate in the trial of Jesus. His cowardice, his indecision, his lack of justice — all of these are charges against him for which history and eternity will rightly judge him. But as for failing to recognize Jesus as a king, we can forgive him that.

Christ is the King — but not so you’d notice.

The man before Pilate had nothing of the regal bearing that kings are supposed to present. We don’t know how tall Jesus was (most contemporary depictions would lead us to think He had to have been six-foot-two or better), but estimates of the average height for Jewish males

in that day would suggest that He stood about five-foot-seven or eight. Semitic in origin, His complexion was likely sallow, maybe even swarthy. If we trust the prophet Isaiah, ***“he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”*** (Isaiah 53:2)

So there was no back-lit, radiantly handsome, blond-haired, Paul Newman-blue-eyed, wunderkind standing before Pilate. There was, to Pilate’s eyes, only this Nazarene preacher who looked like no threat to anyone, much less the imperial power of the Roman Empire. So we can excuse Pilate if he feels the need to ask the question, ***“Are you the King of the Jews?”***

The Kingship of Christ is an article of faith. Even from our eyes, the kingship is hidden, obscure. It is revealed in the same way that God’s fatherhood is revealed and the Spirit’s energizing presence is revealed — that is to say, it comes in the form of what we call special revelation.

The energy of the star we call the sun is obvious — we see it, we feel it, we can measure it. The power of the typhoon or hurricane is obvious — we may not see the wind itself, but we recognize that trees do not commonly lean at forty-degree angles and that rooftops tend to stay where they were initially nailed, neither of which remains true in gale force winds.

Even the power of earthly rulers can be recognized — although this requires a somewhat different use of the term “recognized.” We who live in this nation, this republic, this representative democracy recognize the power of the President, the Congress, the Courts by virtue of something we do to seat people in power: we elect them. We may not always agree with them. We may like some things they do and loathe other things they do. But we recognize that the President is President — not by divine right, not by his having usurped power, but because a majority of our fellow-citizens elected him.

The kingship of Christ is different.

Christ is not King because you woke up this morning, hopped out of bed, and declared: “*I think I’ll let Jesus be King today.*” Christ is the King because of who He is, not because of what you determine you’re willing to let Him be. Second person of the Trinity, God Incarnate, Immanuel (“God with Us”), Alpha and Omega . . . I could go on (take a look at the list at the end of this sermon) — all these qualify Jesus as King. Christ does not *become* King; He *is* King! We recognize His kingship not by a majority vote, but by willingly submitting to His authority.

Power is supposed to come packaged with recognizable symbols that help in recognizing the one in power. Purple used to be the color of royalty, in part because the necessary components to produce the dye were expensive. Ermine, gold, scepters, crowns, thrones, motorcades, trumpets regaling — all these befit one who reigns . . . at least that’s been the human reaction. But Jesus stands before Pilate with none of those trappings of power. Those visual symbols are absent for us, as well.

Christ is the King, but sometimes our experience of that is something akin to “*Not so you’d notice.*”

If Christ is the King, then how come . . . My job is in jeopardy? My sister is battling cancer? Iran may already have a nuclear weapon? If Christ is the King, then how come . . . My checkbook won’t balance? The refrigerator went on the fritz? The “Check Engine” light began to flash on my dashboard? If Christ is the King, then how come . . . I don’t get the answers I want to the prayers that I make? Somebody doesn’t donate several hundreds of thousands of dollars and get our congregational budget into balance? The world seems like such a mess?

We can become fixated on what we think Kingship *should* entail. Christ is the King, so I should prosper. Christ is the King, so I should get my way. Christ is the King, so my thinking should prevail.

Turn that around. It’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about Jesus. “***My kingdom is not from this world,***” Jesus told Pilate. The kingship of Christ is not about what we want to make it to be. The kingship of Christ

is other — beyond our expectations, our aspirations, our hopes, our dreams, our demands. ***“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”*** Jesus declares.

The truth is this . . . Our expectations, aspirations, hopes, dreams, and demands are all immersed in our sinful pride. What if we were to get our way? What if the Kingship of Christ really meant that my way of thinking would prevail? I know there are some of you would be put out by that, because then your way of thinking would not prevail. What if God answered every prayer you made the way you wanted Him to? Do you hear what’s hidden in that idea? *“I know what’s best for me better than God knows what’s best for me.”*

The truth is this. Real power does come in strong-arming others into submission. Real power is accepting what God wants of your life . . . no, not just accepting — embracing, reveling in, rejoicing over. Real power is apparent weakness. Real power is not Jesus standing before the Roman prefect with armed warriors behind Him — real power is Jesus standing before Pilate ready to accept beatings, lashings, humiliation, derision, and finally death. Real power is surrender to the Father in everything.

Today we celebrate Christ the King. He is King . . . but not so you’d notice . . . not if you’re looking for the kind of kingship that Pilate thought should be on display.

We will sing *“Crown Him with many crowns . . . crown him Lord of all.”* But it’s a hidden kingship now. St. John encouraged his readers: ***“Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.”*** We don’t know when we shall be given that sight. For now, we submit to His Kingship in faith. We can’t see it . . . not even a hint of purple, not one hair of ermine, his crown only thorns.

But He is King, and He bids us to come under His reign of love.

Amen.