

Elliott Munn
11/25/18
Text: John 18:33-37

Resident Aliens

As a boy, I learned the basics of monarchy from *The Lion King*. Disney introduced me to benevolent lion kings on the savannah with wise primate advisors. While a good king reigned, life was thriving and full of color. Creatures great and small lived together in harmony as the circle of life progressed. The land was full of ritual, beauty, and dignity: a paradise on the African plains.

Along with all the whimsical and catchy music, the film demonstrates how the abuse of power can destroy a kingdom. Jealousy and the lust for power corrupts King Mufasa's brother, Scar. With Shakespearean flare, Scar instigates a plot that kills his brother, disposes of his nephew Simba, and successfully clears a path for himself to become king. While Scar reigns, the skies grow dark and the savannah barren, as a malaise settles over the land. It was no coincidence that Scar's chief cronies are scavenging hyenas, whose gains are always others' losses. Life becomes a cruel zero-sum game

Eventually, the exiled Simba bravely returns as a reluctant but principled leader who understands the needs of common animals, exposes Scar, and takes his rightful place as king. Life returns to its properly verdant state as a good King once again reigns.

Today is Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, which marks the end of the liturgical year. Before we turn to Advent and prepare ourselves to hear the story of Christ's arrival in the baby Jesus, we take a Sunday to mark the legacy of the Gospel lessons we have explored together over the last year. We pause to recognize Christ's dominion over all that is, and celebrate that there is no place in the universe outside of Christ's care.

Nevertheless, recalling the annals of history, we get more Scars than Mufasas. Kingship does not have a sterling reputation. The whole notion of the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday sometimes makes me uncomfortable. Sure, there are prayers, hymns, and scripture celebrating Jesus as King, but is kingship still an image that resonates with us? Would it be helpful to do away with such hierarchical, patriarchal, and political imagery? Rather simply trashing this theological image, which would be easy, let us consider it in earnest. Let us prayerfully discern if God is speaking through it. Perhaps we can redeem this image of Christ's kingship to have meaning for us today.

In today's lection, Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Pilate is the direct representative of the Roman Emperor, the great king of all kings of the greater Mediterranean. Having just questioned the priests who hand Jesus over, Pilate knows their case against Jesus is flimsy. Not wanting to entangle himself unnecessarily in a local dispute, Pilate asks the question that concerns him most as a Roman official, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

While the Romans did not care much about the day-to-day management of territories under their control, they were deathly serious about hierarchies and kingship. Caesar was the only true king throughout the empire and any other was simply a vassal who led with their blessing. To declare oneself a king without proper permission on Roman land was political treason. Faced with this question of whether or not he is a king, Jesus does not give a straightforward answer. First, he deflects, and then he describes what type of king he is, replying, "My kingdom is not from this world."

The Gospel writer is showing us here that Jesus is not simply a noble version of an earthly king. In fact, he is a king of a very different sort. Jesus says, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." Traditional kings, such as the emperor, expected their subjects to die on their behalf to preserve the luxurious lifestyle of the dynasty. Jesus flips the typical expectations of hierarchy. John's Jesus willingly lays down his own life so that all might have an experience of abundant life.

We as Christians draw our inspiration from being citizens of Christ's commonwealth. Christ's Spirit draws together people of different tongues, races, and identities. It fills us with power to live as if Christ's Kingdom is already among us. As king, Christ is not interested in hoarding his power but sharing it with us to bring justice, peace, and joy to our collective life.

Until it is on earth as it is in heaven, Christians have a complicated immigration status in the world. An anonymous work from the second century CE known as the *Letter to Diognetus* describes Christians this way:

"Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life...They live in their own countries, but only as aliens...What the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world."

To live as if Christ is our king is to be resident aliens in our own country. As such, our will to transform our surroundings is not dependent upon who is or is not in power. Yes, we can work to have our government reflect our values, but our government is not who give us our power. Since it is Christ who breathes the power of the Holy Spirit into us, our allegiance is not to our town, state, or country. For us as Christians, hierarchies are only effective insofar as they place Christ as our soul sovereign. Making Christ our true king directs us to use our God-given power for the flourishing of life and the glory of God. It empowers us resident aliens to be salt for the earth, leaven for the bread, and the soul of the body.

While there is not much appetite, at least in the West, for traditional monarchy, democracy is not thriving either. When I was at the Taizé Community, an ecumenical monastery in France earlier this month, a brother led an evening discussion on the state of democracy around the world. Young adults from Germany, France, the Czech Republic, the United States, and Italy shared how there was growing political discontent in their countries. Every person expressed

frustration with how certain political factions were undermining the democratic process itself. We sat in a circle facing one another and a common sense of dis-ease that crossed national boundaries was palpable. We worried that the very systems our countries had set up to protect us from corrupt kings were heading in an autocratic direction.

That same week, the bells in the church rang to commemorate Armistice Day, the end of a war stemming in no small part from monarchs' incompetence and greed. The tolling bells reminded us that a singular strong leader would not save us.

When I go to Taizé, I try to spend more time listening than talking. Because I have plenty of opportunities to share my thoughts with you all, I try to spend more time listening there. If I were to share a message with them, it would be to hold on to hope. The author of the Gospel of John knew what it was like to live under an unjust king and to feel persecuted in the face of oppression. Lifting up Christ as king was an act of resistance. It was a reminder to unjust government that they may have the power now but ultimately their injustice will do them in.

While earthly rulers bend the facts to reinforce their power, Christ's power is rooted in truth. When Pilate asks Jesus one last time if he is a king, Jesus responds, "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." Christ kingship does not demand our blind loyalty. Christ is not like Scar or for that matter Mufasa or Simba. Christ serves us first, and then invites us to work beside him to lift up the truth so that all might be free.

With Christ as our King, embodying his power has real implications in the way we live our lives. Because Christ is king of all, his call on our lives extends to every part. We do not stop belonging to Christ when we vote, buy our groceries, or go to work. Endowed with gifts of the Spirit, we always run the risk of abusing our power. The gift of the image of Christ the king is that it helps us prioritize our lives. It eschews simple solutions and cuts to the heart of the matter. Are we putting the truth first? Are we putting Christ first? As governments rise and fall, our king is Christ Jesus.

© 2018 Elliott Munn all rights reserved.

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107