

## You Say That I Am King

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John 18: 33-38

One of the most pervasive threads in American culture from even before its founding as a nation has been the idea that we are a uniquely “Christian” nation. From the earliest myths of America that imagined it as the “Peaceable Kingdom” that Isaiah predicted; to the mistaken notion that our Founders, such as Jefferson and Washington who were actually Deists, were really Christians; through the Mormon belief that God’s “New Jerusalem” will arrive here on this continent; to today’s Christian Evangelical attempts to enforce their extremist values on our multi-cultural society, the idea that the United States is meant to be a “Christian” nation has been a persistent and sadly negative stream in American thinking. Many Americans think of our nation as the New Israel and believe that it’s always been God’s will to establish a Christian nation on earth.

But is it God’s will to establish a Christian nation on earth? Let’s consider this from a Biblical perspective. And let’s start with what we believe as Christians: We believe that Jesus is Lord.

To call Jesus Lord is actually to assert something very undemocratic. We Americans dislike “lords” and even rebelled against the idea of monarchy. But to call Jesus “Lord” is to assert something about him that we would never ever ascribe to another human being.

We are saying that Jesus is sovereign Lord of the universe whether I choose him to be or not. That’s the difference between a kingdom and a democracy. A King, a queen, a sovereign is the ruler whether I like it or not, whether anyone in the whole kingdom likes it or not. There’s no election. We may not like it. We may refuse to believe it. We may rebel against it and assert an alternative government is better. All those things happen in earthly kingdoms, too.

But to assert that Jesus is Sovereign Lord of the universe is quite different from asserting that some human being is Lord of some earthly realm. For one thing, no matter how much we dislike it, there’s nothing to

be done about it. We can try to wish it away but it won't change. We can rebel but we can't overthrow him. We can form an alternative, "shadow" government but that shadow government doesn't stand a chance to replace Jesus' rule.

So doesn't that mean that you should forget about democracy when it comes to God? Since we Christians know the "real" truth, shouldn't we just force it on everyone else?

Many Jews in the time of Jesus believed something to this effect. They believed that the Messiah would come, overthrow Roman rule, and establish God's reign of justice and peace here on earth. That's what a lot of Jesus' disciples thought he was up to.

And that is what is going on in our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, the representative of Caesar, whose empire supposedly rules the world. That disregards the fact that a large part of the world was ruled by China back then, another large portion of Europe and the Slavic world were populated by what Rome called "Barbarians," and huge swaths of Africa were a mystery to Romans—never mind that the Americas had not even been "discovered" by Europeans—but anyway. Pilate represented the Roman Emperor, supposed ruler of the world, held to be a god by his people. And he holds the fate of Jesus in his hands. Or so he thinks. This situation, the idea that somehow God must submit to a human-defined destiny, was hardly original to Pilate or to Rome and really hasn't changed much in thousands of years.

So Pilate thinks he holds the Lord of the Universe's destiny in his hands. He is, perhaps, trying to be fair and even-handed. I have some questions about that but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you a king?" To Pilate, this is the crux of the matter. The Temple leadership has brought Jesus before him on the charge of claiming to be "the King of the Jews," which would mean that Jesus was actively inciting rebellion against Rome. It would mean that Jesus' claim to be the Messiah meant exactly what Jewish popular culture thought: he was, or at least he thought he was, God's emissary on earth to overthrow Rome. If that is the case, Pilate would have no choice but to have Jesus executed as a rebel. So "are you a king?" is the most important question that Pilate needs answered.

This is a question we need answered too. Because if Jesus is that kind of messiah, the earthly sovereign ordained by God to rule the world, then maybe we should be trying to establish God's nation right here in America.

Jesus' response seems cryptic. I'm not a king in this world, he says. If I was, my followers would be fighting right now to free me, but as it is, my kingdom is not of this world.

It's an interesting answer. Pilate may be taking it as the confession of a lunatic, someone with hallucinations and visions of grandeur. The important point to him, though, is that Jesus is right: if he was claiming to be king the way that the chief priests and Temple elite said he was, then his disciples would be an armed band of terrorists trying to rescue their wanna-be king. They would be there with swords and spears pushing up against barricades of Roman soldiers to defend their Messiah who is the rightful king of the world. They aren't. If Jesus was that kind of messiah, he'd have trained his disciples as an army and told them to go armed to Pilate's palace prepared to overthrow the government. He didn't. A right-wing politician recently asserted that "things would have turned out differently" if Jesus had an AR-15. They would have indeed. And that's why Jesus *didn't* have an AR-15, or warrior followers.

Ergo, Jesus is not claiming to be any kind of king in a way that is a threat to Pilate or to Rome. He's some sort of dreamer, but not a threat.

This by the way is the way we often view Jesus' role in the world. It is metaphysical, yes; Jesus is Lord in some invisible ultimate sense—but not Lord in the sense of assaulting our deeply set worldly values or the concrete problems and issues of the world around us.

That's Pilate's point of view. But let's consider the answer from Jesus' point of view.

From Jesus' perspective, his answer is not dreamy or other-worldly. It is a statement of fact: my kingdom is not of this world. When he says that, he doesn't mean that his kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but rather that it is not a "Worldly" kingdom—that is, that it doesn't function by worldly values like wealth, or prestige, or dominating power, or as Jesus specifically says, violence—the power of the sword. In that sense, Jesus isn't after Caesar's throne. **There's nothing Caesar has that Jesus wants.** Let me say that again. **There is nothing Caesar has that Jesus wants.**

As Jesus says more than once in the Gospel of John, this world belongs to Satan—by which he doesn't mean, again, that Satan rules the earth, but that Satan has defined the worldly values that this world operates by.

Consistently when Jesus talks about "the world," what he means is a culture, a system of values and beliefs, that are at odds with the values of the Kingdom of God, and in fact represent a rebellion against the Kingdom of God, an attempt to usurp God's sovereign rule. To Jesus, Pilate represents all those worldly values that are at odds with the Kingdom of God.

So, Pilate, Jesus says, no offense, but I am not even vaguely interested in ruling the world you represent and its standards, cultures and ideals. I have no interest in a kingdom that uses violence and the sword and dominating power to enforce its rule. I have no interest in Caesar's empire. My kingdom is not of this world.

Nonetheless, Jesus is Lord of this world. Jesus is Lord of the planet earth, and of the whirling cosmos of which the planet earth is part. Jesus is Lord of the Roman Empire of 2000 years ago. Jesus is Lord of the United States of America of today. Jesus is Lord of you and me, individually and corporately, whether we believe in him or not, whether we follow him or not, whether we completely disregard his Kingdom and its values or not. Jesus is sovereign Lord because that is what a sovereign Lord is—someone not elected to office, but who is absolute ruler regardless; someone who cannot be overthrown; and someone whose values and interests will ultimately be victorious. Jesus is the sovereign Lord because whether any of us believe it or not, or do it or not, his values are the defining values of the cosmos. His laws are the true laws. His practices are the true practices.

And that's the best news there could possibly be. The good news is that it's not just any divinity that rules all of creation—nor is it just any normal human being that runs all that is—it is none other than Jesus Christ. The Lord of the universe is the God who took human form to help us to know who God is. The Lord of the Universe is the one who taught us to love our enemies and then proves it by loving his enemies. The Lord of the Universe is the One who refuses to use the power of the sword to overcome those in rebellion against him. The Lord of the Universe instead made himself vulnerable, suffered and died for our sakes, and then rose again from the dead to defeat the ultimate enemy of all that is—death itself. The Lord of the universe died, as the Gospel of John tells us in John 3:17, not

that the world would be condemned but that through him the world would be saved.

The ruler of the universe, the Sovereign of all there is, is the Lord of Love. And so we know that contrary to the values “the world” teaches us, it is *love* that rules the universe. And love will win. Love is winning now. Because Jesus is Lord.

What does all this mean in terms of Christian engagement in the messy world of politics? A lot of progressives take the phrase “separation of church and state” so literally that they don’t think that Christians should be in any way a part of the discussion about what shapes American values and politics. I don’t believe that either. I think that to be in a pluralistic society means, on the one hand, that I have no right to claim my point of view is better than anyone else’s—but it also means that no one has a right to claim my point of view is *worse* than anyone else’s either. To live in a democracy means not only that we are all equal, and all ideas are equal, but also that you need to be pro-active in getting your views put forward. You need to be at the table. The late wonderful Texas Governor Ann Richards used to tell people, “If you aren’t at the table, you’re on the menu.” You need to be at the table along with everybody else. You have a right to be there, and Christians no less—or more—than anyone else.

But for progressive Christians, we are there representing Christ who doesn’t want to dominate others, but to *serve* them. What we mean by that is that we represent who Jesus represents: **the least of these**. The poor, the downtrodden, the voiceless, the marginalized, the powerless. When we say we’re at the table representing Jesus’ values, we mean that we’re there representing the least of these—because otherwise, like Ann Richards said, they’re on the menu—and the God of love will not stand for that.

For us this means we find common ground with a lot of other religions and movements. They don’t claim Jesus as their Lord, maybe, but they sure care about many of the same things Jesus cares about, and that’s what matters to us. We form alliances, we build bridges, we overcome differences in order to work together to build a nation that better represents those values.

But the one value we know our Lord doesn’t want us to practice—because he didn’t practice it himself—is **domination**. Overpowering others. Being cruel, merciless, or unforgiving. Being arrogant and

demanding to get our way. None of that is what Jesus taught or stood for or in any way characterizes how he lived his life.

We believe that by doing those things—serving those most in need, building alliances, practicing mercy and forgiveness, and speaking out against injustice in whatever form it takes—we are doing more to spread the good news of the love and grace and power of Jesus Christ than all the armies and all political attempts to dominate others can ever accomplish. We believe those things have the power to bring God's Kingdom closer to fruition. Because people will be convinced by them, changed by them, rather than crushed and oppressed by them. And because that's what is really meant by Christ's Lordship: **The absolute Sovereignty of God's love.**