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Christ the King, B  
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The magi were looking for the newborn Christ Child. They asked, “Where is he who is born king of the Jews?” And that question set off a firestorm like none that had ever been. That one innocent question alerted Herod to the presence of a rival in his midst. To eliminate the rival he had his soldiers kill all children in an entire region of his realm, just to make sure he got rid of his arch-rival. But, it didn’t exactly happen the way Herod planned. The Christ child had come to be a king, but not the kind of king they thought. He was the kind of king who could be hidden in deep dark Egypt, and no one even noticed or cared.

And once again, the question was asked. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked Jesus mockingly.

The very idea of the Jews having a king in any meaningful sense would have seemed ridiculous to Pilate. Furthermore, Jesus must have looked nothing like a King as he stood before Pilate. He had been arrested in Gethsemane; all his disciples had abandoned him; he had defended himself before a Jewish court; and he had probably been roughed up by Roman soldiers. But there was also a serious side to the question. A king of the Jews would have represented a challenge to

Pilate's authority and (more importantly) to his masters in Rome. The Roman Empire responded to such challenges the same way Herod had. They just had the enemy knocked off.

As he responded to Pilate's question, Jesus denied that he was a king in any way that would make sense to the Roman governor. "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over."

The confrontation with Pilate was rich with irony and ambiguity. Jesus, although he was deep into his own misery, was dancing a little intellectual dance with Pilate. Pilate appeared to be powerful but was really powerless; Jesus appeared to be powerless but was really powerful. John had already told his readers that part of Jesus' mission was to "cast out" the ruler of this world who has no power over Him. Paradoxically, He brought down the "ruler of this world" by submitting to his power; his death brought about the destruction of the powers that nailed him to the cross. The Jesus we read and know turned the world upside down so that it could be turned right side up again. We have talked about that before, haven't we?

Pilate and Herod were not the only ones who misunderstood the nature of Jesus' kingship. Even the disciples failed to understand it, and they were his best friends. James and John wanted to sit beside Jesus in his kingdom. To "sit" was to occupy a position of power, and to sit beside the king was to share in his power. But Jesus told them that they completely misunderstood the nature of his kingship and kingdom: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant." We have also talked about that, haven't we? I think you were on your feet when I gave you the charge of facing the cross as you work to build a strong church.

A rabbi once said, "Christian triumphalism makes me uneasy." It makes me uneasy, too, and the feast of Christ the King is awash in triumphalism.

"Crown him with many crowns," we sing, and "All hail the power of Jesus' name." It makes some of us uneasy because it is all too easy to give Jesus the crown but to take the power for ourselves. The followers of the Crucified One overcame Rome by martyrdom, but after Constantine's conversion, the victorious Christians started making martyrs of their former adversaries. The history of the church is spattered with blood because power requires violence to maintain itself. To put it another way, we use the rhetoric of Jesus but we act like Herod and Pilate. If you don't believe me, just let your remember Jim Jones and Jonestown. You might say that Jim Jones and his followers were just a little too religious.

The kingdom over which Jesus reigns still defies our understanding. He rules over a kingdom with no borders to defend, no soldiers to defend it, and no weapons for the soldiers to use. It is a kingdom that inverts our values. The one who serves is the one who rules.

We still ask the questions that the magi and Pilate asked: “Where is he who is born king of the Jews?” and “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Knowingly or not, Pilate answered his own question; the Gospel of John tells us that “Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. It read: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.’”

The cross is Jesus’ royal throne and also the antidote to Christian triumphalism. Jesus reigns from the cross, and to share his kingship, we must also share his suffering. There is plenty of room at the right and left hands of Jesus, but those who would share his power must also share his cross.

Like the magi, we are also on a pilgrimage seeking the king. Unlike them, we cannot bring our gifts to a manger in Bethlehem. But we can still find him in those he came to serve if we will just open our eyes.

This is how I am absolutely positive that this congregation understands this Kingdom we are wrestling with, this morning. You have been to the cross. You have been to the cross, and depending on who you talk to, you can still smell the blood on the people and the walls of Good Samaritan Episcopal Church. But, you have opened your eyes, and you know how to find those he came to serve. Your eyes are wide open. You don't have to be who you are, but you are. I know who you are, because in the past two weeks, I have experienced it, first hand. You don't have to do anything differently than be to everyone else whom you have been to me the past three weeks. Who you have been is the epitome of a faithful people and a successful church.

I remember saying to you not long ago that we need you to break a sweat with us, both physically and emotionally and spiritually. We need you to be more of who you already are.

It says in Matthew 25: "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food.'" You are already living in the kingdom. You have been to the cross, and I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was hungry, and you gave me food. Amen.