

**King of the Jungle
John 18: 33-37
Don Lincoln**

Christ the King Sunday. What in the world is that? Another one of those church holy-days that nobody really knows much about. And why, in God's name, does the lectionary – the people who put the lectionary readings together; it's a three-year cycle of readings – why do they have us reading this passage about Jesus before Pilate on the Sunday before Advent??

The title of this sermon – King of the Jungle - may not give you a clue as to where I am going. As far as you know, it could be a description of a race in the parking lot against some huge pick-up truck for the last parking space at the mall Black Friday morning in the early dawn.....or it could be how one feels after spending four hours untangling those doggone Christmas lights which somehow, between last January 1st and November 24th, have gone biological and grown together like Kudzu vines.

Or maybe you think, "Ah.....yes, the next four weeks will be a jungle – last minute shopping, even laster-minute wrapping, licking hundreds of envelopes with Christmas cards; baking cookies for however many school Christmas parties, getting to the office festivities; determining if there is a period of three free hours to go wander around green trees on a vacant lot, trim 27 inches off a too large Christmas tree trunk, and spending 45 minutes shimmying up the stand to make sure a 100 pounds of ornaments don't bring the tree tumbling down in the midst of the six o'clock news on December 23rd.

And all of that may be fit the title. But I did have a much bigger jungle in mind. The jungle of which all those things are just a part – of which this segment of time called the holidays is simply one more brief period.

The jungle you and I call life.

There is no question in my mind each of us knows some of what that means. Whether it's simply the vignettes I just described, or the daily barrage of the news; another shooting; another disaster; another political fistfight; another episode of bigotry and racism and I GOT MINE. "It's a jungle out there."

So.....what on earth does "Christ The King" mean in these days?

I thought about kingship this week.....

1. King of the hill – strongest pushes everyone off.
2. Sky King – rescues Penny and everyone else in trouble.
3. The King – of Rock-n-Roll – Elvis.
4. King size – biggest and best.
5. King of the Road – free wheeling, laid back, don't worry, be happy.
6. It's Good to Be The King – It's good to be king and have things your way.
7. King me – checkers – jumps in all directions, takes over and wins.

The fact is, most of us don't really know much of kings. Some of us get our understanding from stories that begin, "Once upon a time...." The kings of fairy tales – knights sheathed in gleaming armor; banquets at massive tables in some cavernous castle dining room. Perhaps another view is whatever we hear on the news or read in the tabloids about the royal family in England.

When it comes to kings, most of us don't have a clue. I wonder in this Gospel passage, if Pilate and Jesus aren't caught in this same dilemma? Not that they don't have experience with Kings – they do. But it appears they aren't talking about the same thing. It reminds me of that movie "A Few Good Men" with Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise – where Cruise demands "the truth" and Nicholson leans over from the witness chair: "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!!" They're talking right past each other. They are not on the same page.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate the charge against Him is He claims to be King of the Jews. Well....Pilate works for THE KING. One of his jobs is to take care of anybody who opposes the king. That's why Jesus stands before him. But the idea that this bruised and beaten man before him could be taken for a king must have seemed ridiculous to Pilate. Pilate knows what Kings look like. He knows what Kings act like.

But Pilate does his duty. He asks Jesus if the charge against Him is true. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers: "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 to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

My guess is that Jesus is saying that were He and His followers **of this world**, then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: **violence**. Attack ads. Attack dogs. Attack lackeys. But Jesus is not of this world, so Jesus will not defend himself with violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom through violence. Jesus will make no followers using violence.

This is a King whose rules are different. Love your neighbor as yourself, not enslave, pillage, plunder, rape, and conquer. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

The worldly king has you pay taxes to take care of the royal household. What does this king ask you to do with your “taxes”? Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Take care of the widow and the orphan.

In a world where kingly hats are adorned with precious jewels – crowns emblazoned with diamonds and rubies and sapphires set in massive forgings of precious gold, the only crown worn by this King of Kings is one made of thorns.

Monarchs rule from mighty thrones, carved of rare and exotic woods, set high above a multitude of servants so that everyone can bow down easily to them. The only throne of this King is a common tree, in two pieces, raised up for all to see, the better to mock and deride Him.

Earthly kings separate themselves from the masses – living in lavish settings, guarded by dozens, occasionally viewed out the window where they wave a supposedly beneficent hand. This King has no place to lay His head; He lives with the lowly, the despised, and rejected, and cares for the least.

Many worldly kings inherit their position by being born of royal blood. But this king sets aside his royal standing, emptying himself of all that befits one of his station, and it is not his bloodline, but his very blood that renders Him King of kings.

Kings of the earth often rule with an iron fist, requiring others to live in a state of forced labor. This King lives with an outstretched hand, and proclaims, behold I stand at the door and knock. He awaits an invitation into your heart and your home.

“My kingdom is not from here.” Jesus makes it clear to Pilate. “That may be YOUR world, Pilate, but it’s not mine. That may be YOUR understanding of King – but it’s not the kind of King who stands before you.”

“So have at it Pilate. Do what Your kings do. Work your violence against me – but watch what you get in return. Forgiveness and mercy and love. Go for it, Pilate, and you’ll set loose a power that can transform the most hardened of hearts. Not kill the heart – but change it.

The lectionary folks who put the texts together inserted this Jesus\Pilate text the Sunday before Advent – this Sunday before we start this Church year all over again with the coming of the Christ child. They put this text here to remind us Jesus’ cruciform kingdom is grounded in a different sort of power. Jesus tramples Death by His death. It’s not in the power of swords and cannons but it’s in the power of His name that the church preaches and heals and casts out demons. This is power of a different order that rescues you and me from the bondage of sin, from the fear of death, from slavery to our own little selves.

It’s a good text to hear.

Truth is, I don't think most of us have ever been totally convinced that we believe or want that version of power. We're often with the crowd, of that day long ago, crowing for Barabbas with his base but reliable power, knives whetted sharp and all holstered-up. Because you and I know it's a jungle out there.

But you and I also know that the church, as it has wandered across the ages of this world, has always stumbled and fallen when it has leaned on Barabbas' kind of power.

And it has won when it has played the long game of faithful dependence on the power of a Lamb who was slain. A King came to serve. Parades of nuclear-tipped military power snaking through concrete capitals may impress many, but the cross, and the power of its mysterious, upside-down sacrificial love, always wins in the end. Always.

He is King. He always has been. He always will be. Thanks be to God. AMEN.