

Here are some questions that you may remember from your baptism or confirmation, or at least from the last time you saw someone else baptized or confirmed:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?
Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?
Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

That last question might trip us up a little. It might trip us up because when we use the term Lord, we usually mean God. What if we changed that question to, “Do you promise to follow and obey him as your King?” That might give us a little different perspective on the question.

Today, the last Sunday of the Liturgical year is Christ the King Sunday. It might seem odd then that we read from Luke’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus on this day. The triumphal entry, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem accompanied by shouts of, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord!” might seem more appropriate. Or, maybe reading the last few verses of the Gospel according to Luke, where Jesus blessed the disciples and was carried into heaven would make more sense.

Instead of reading of some great triumphant moment, we read about the crucifixion. We read about soldiers mocking Jesus, saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Then there was the sign that Pilate ordered to be affixed to the cross that read, “This is the King of the Jews.” These proclamations of Jesus as king were intended to be a mockery. Certainly, in that moment, no one took them seriously.

What if the problem is that we have a skewed view of kingdom, and power, and authority? What if our view of these words has been distorted by people like Pilate, Caesar, Hitler, and Stalin? Do we really understand kingdom, power, and authority in God’s view?

Pilate certainly did not understand. You may remember the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate tried to release Jesus so he could crucify Barabbas. If you think it is because Pilate was a just ruler, and saw that Jesus was an innocent man that he wanted to crucify Barabbas, you’re overestimating the character of Pilate.

Pilate was notorious for his brutality, and his ham-fisted manner of trying to enforce order in Judea. Pilate wanted to crucify Barabbas rather than Jesus because he believed that the true threat to order in Jerusalem was Barabbas. Barabbas took part in an insurrection and was guilty of murder. That is where Pilate saw the threat, not from Jesus. Jesus looked utterly benign to Pilate.

When we promised to follow and obey Jesus as our Lord, did we have a view similar to Pilate’s? Did we think Jesus was benign? Or, did we understand that following Jesus as Lord would make a radical difference in the way we live our lives?

Part of the problem is that when we read about Pilate interrogating Jesus in the Gospel According to John, we read that Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

When we hear these words, we might think that Jesus was saying, “My Kingdom and this world are entirely separate matters. My Kingdom has nothing to do with the here and now.”

That is what Pilate thought. Pilate thought that Jesus posed no threat to the order of Rome. If Pilate had understood the power of Jesus to transform this world, not just in the age to come, but in the here and now, Pilate would have trembled before Jesus.

The purpose of the Roman Empire was to accumulate as much wealth and comfort as possible for the elite citizens of Rome. Pilate was one beneficiary of this purpose. The methods of the Roman Empire were force, coercion, and brutality. That was the order of the world that Pilate understood. It is the order of the world that most people through human history have understood.

We may mask it in gentler terms today, but it’s still there, just underneath the surface. Rather than brutality, we use things like wealth and fame to coerce people. We tell children that they should go to college so they can get an education and make a good living, which is to say, plenty of money. When was the last time someone said, “You need to get an education so you can make a contribution to the world?” We measure success by the number of Twitter followers someone has. We ascribe some kind of authority to Hollywood stars because they’ve appeared in a movie about some cause that they may or may not know anything about, but they do ride in their limousines from which they step out onto a red carpet like kings and queens. If we buy into these views of power, we will look at the sign affixed to the cross, the one that says, “This is the King of the Jews,” and will be confused.

Pilate did not know it, but his sign was correct. Jesus Christ, hanging on the cross between two bandits, was the King. He could have come down if he wanted to be like Pilate. But that is not what Kingdom, power, and authority really are. Jesus did not have to get beyond the cross to reveal Kingdom, power, and authority. On the cross, Jesus revealed Kingdom, power, and authority. In that moment in history, Jesus overcame the forces of wickedness and powers of evil that fight against his Kingdom.

No matter how enticing wealth, fame, and the ability to coerce people, to bend them to our will, might be, these things are not the way to Kingdom, power, and authority. They were doomed to destruction by the cross of Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven broke into this world with self-giving love, forgiveness, and healing. The kingdoms of this world have the power to deal in death, but the Kingdom of Heaven brings life. The kingdoms of this world might be able to temporarily control the bodies of men and women, but the Kingdom of Heaven has the power to transform the hearts of men and women.

There is one other person in our reading from the Gospel today who proclaimed that Jesus was the king. There is one person who was sincere. One of the men crucified with Jesus recognized the self-giving love of the King of Heaven and Earth and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” This one was given life.

When we hear the question, “Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus as your Lord?” may we remember that we are not being asked if we merely believe that He is God Incarnate. Remember that we are being asked if we will endeavor to live with the kind of self-giving love he brought. We are not simply being asked if we will receive his forgiveness, we are being asked if we will endeavor to forgive as we have been forgiven. We are not being asked simply if we want to go to heaven when we die. We are being asked if we will reject the system of the present world that deals in coercion and death. We are being asked if we will try to serve one another as Jesus served us.

Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus as your Lord?