

You might have seen advertisements for a new movie about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian who was executed by the Nazis for conspiring against Hitler. Bonhoeffer, a pacifist and what we would call a conscientious objector, worked in German intelligence, where he was certainly in contact with conspirators who planned to assassinate Hitler; but there is no evidence that Bonhoeffer was or would have been involved in that violence himself. He was arrested for misusing his position to help a group of Jews escape Germany and for evading military service. In other words, he wasn't arrested for trying to assassinate Hitler but for dodging the draft. Yet the poster for this new movie advertises: *Bonhoeffer—Pastor, Spy, Assassin* beside a picture of the actor holding a gun. An international association of scholars, and surviving members and descendants of Bonhoeffer's extended family, and even the actors who made the film have all denounced this misrepresentation of his life and the twisting of his legacy for Christian nationalist propaganda. Now, I don't believe in censorship; before I did this for a living, I taught banned books to teenagers, and I see no conflict between that calling and this one. But do be aware that this portrayal of Bonhoeffer as some kind of Lutheran James Bond is untethered from reality, just as Christian nationalist depictions of Jesus as some aggressive, domineering Rambo are the opposite of the Jesus we find in scripture.

I used to think Christ the King Sunday was old fashioned and a little irrelevant; after all, even the few kings who still exist these days are mostly figureheads—cultural symbols who have little to do with the governing that is done by prime ministers and other elected officials. But that was before I learned the history: In fact, Christ the King is the youngest feast day on our calendar, celebrating only its 99th birthday this year. Pope Pious XI added Christ the King to the liturgical cycle in response to rising nationalism and the growing threat of authoritarian leaders following the first World War and other destabilizing events like the Spanish Flu pandemic. People probably thought he was overreacting, but of course, within just a few years, European states were claiming authority over the church as an institution and over the theology it was allowed to teach. To confess that Christ is King is to claim that nothing and nobody else has ultimate authority; it is and has always been a radical, subversive statement to make.

Artists throughout the centuries have depicted Christ as a king in the style of their own monarchs. Usually that meant sitting on a throne, wearing a crown, holding a scepter. So we might be surprised that today's appointed scripture is John's account of Pilate interrogating a bound and beaten Jesus. Pilate wants to know if Jesus is the King of the Jews; this is a fair question, since claiming to be king when one is not a rightful king is sedition. And sedition leads to uprisings and civil wars; remember that when the magi come looking for the *newborn* King of the Jews, Herod was so afraid for his reign that he ordered the murder of all the babies in Bethlehem. As the keeper of the peace, Pilate was responsible for quelling any kind of insurrection; you can tell he doesn't really want to be doing his job, and that he doesn't really think that Jesus has done anything but

anger the leaders of a religion that he doesn't believe in, but if it means placating the bloodthirsty mob, Pilate won't stand up for his convictions, even to save an innocent man.

Notice that Jesus never calls himself *king*, but what he does say is that his kingdom is not from this world; as evidence, he explains that if it were a worldly, political kingdom, his followers would be fighting to protect him. When Peter tried to defend Jesus at his arrest with a sword, Jesus told him to stop. After Jesus fed the multitude and the crowds wanted to take him and make him king by force, Jesus ran away. When the devil tempts Jesus in the wilderness with authority over all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus says "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus had plenty of opportunities to establish a worldly, political kingdom, and every time, he declined; Jesus never attempts to use the power of the state to establish the reign of God's kingdom.

Jesus' claim that his kingdom is "not from this world" has sometimes been interpreted to mean that Jesus is the king of heaven—up there somewhere—and therefore that all his teaching and preaching, feeding and healing, trial and suffering, crucifixion and death were just preliminary chapters on his way to *becoming* king; that when he was down here doing all this pesky loving his enemy business, Jesus was not yet king, but he *became* king when he got to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father, because that's what we think kings should look like; and now that he's up there on a throne, wearing a crown, just like every portrait of every earthly king in history, he's going to rule by wielding the same political, military, violent power that earthly kings have always used. But whether we call it the *Kingdom of Heaven*, like Matthew usually does, or the *Kingdom of God*, like Mark, Luke, and John usually do, Jesus is not talking about ruling that place up there that we'll go to someday. Jesus is talking about us living like we're his subjects *right now*. When Jesus lived a life of humble service, he wasn't waiting to become king, he wasn't working his way up, he wasn't satisfying the first phase of a bait and switch; he was showing us that loving, merciful service is the rule of law in God's kingdom. He was king when he was feeding the hungry; he was king when he was welcoming the outcast; he was king when he was refusing to use brute force, even to save himself.

Jesus says that whoever belongs to the truth listens to his voice, but Pilate wants to know, "What is truth?" The truth if Christ is King is that much of what happens in this world is not what God wants to happen, not when Jesus did things so differently. The truth if Christ is King is that we're called to conform ourselves to Jesus' example, not to try to reshape Jesus into a cosmic version of the rulers we read about in history books or see on the news. The truth if Christ is King is that Jesus isn't going to become like the kings of the earth, but that in the end even the kings will become like Christ. The truth if Christ is King is that we can't do un-Jesusy things and claim we're doing them in Jesus' name. We all are subjects of something, regardless of what we say or sing on Sunday mornings; it's how we live our lives that shows who we believe is our king and what we believe is the truth. So, disciples, are we listening to Jesus' words or to someone or something else to give us the answer when we ask, *What is true?*