

November 23rd, 2025

Colossians 1:11-20 - Disciples Live for Jesus

If you can believe it, next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. That means today is the last Sunday of the Church calendar year and we get to start a new cycle next week. And as with every final Sunday of the church year, we wrap it up by observing “Christ the King Sunday.” So happy Christ the King Sunday! Is this some ancient observance that goes back to the early days of the church? No. It’s a recent development.

The feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a reaction to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini seizing power in Italy during his March on Rome in 1922. Did you know that Mussolini is literally the “father of fascism?” The word “fasces” is an old Latin word for a bundle of birch rods tied together with a strap. The ancient Roman dictators used this image to symbolize the power of Rome. One birch rod can be easily broken, but bound together with *many* rods, it becomes much stronger and with each new territory that Rome conquers, the bundle gets sturdier. Mussolini liked to think of himself as a new “Caesar” who would usher in the glory of the ancient Roman empire.

Pope Pius wasn’t just concerned about Mussolini though. He was concerned about this whole “return of the Roman Empire” trend that was happening in Europe during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The German imperial leader during World War I was Wilhelm II, also known as Kaiser Wilhelm II. “Kaiser” wasn’t his name, it was a title. Kaiser is the German word for “Caesar.” The same thing was happening in Russia, but their leaders were called Czars which, as you might guess, is the Russian word for Caesar. The problem is that a lot of the churches at that time were also getting on board this “nostalgia for the Roman Empire” train. That’s when Pope Pius stepped up and said, “Okay, this is getting out of hand here, and the church needs to stand up and remind folks about how Jesus’ values were *never* in alignment with Caesar’s values, and that the church should know better.” Pius wanted to make it clear that *Christ’s* reign is what the church should stand for, *not* Caesar’s

or any other *wanna-be* Caesar's reign. And so, from that time forward the church in all nations repented and said, "We'll never get caught up in this kind of tomfoolery again," and the fully realized reign of Christ was established and a golden age of peace and prosperity followed and is still in place today. Not really. But it would've been nice. So yeah. That's our history lesson for the day. Maybe it will give you enough information if the subject comes up on Jeopardy someday. "Yes Ken, I'll take anti-fascist church initiatives for \$300."

Anyway, let's take a look at one of the texts that inspired Pope Pius to establish this Feast of Christ the King. Last week we explored Isaiah's dream-inspired vision where he showed God's people a glimpse of what the *kingdom* of God is all about. This week let's talk about the King. The Apostle Paul writes, "He (meaning Jesus) himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have *first place in everything*." Let's put a bookmark on that phrase, "first place in everything" and we'll get back to it.

When I first started going to church camp back in the early days of my faith, we sang a call and response song called, "King Jesus Is All."

"King Jesus is all!
My all in all!
And I know that he'll answer
every time I call.
Walkin' by my side,
I'm satisfied.
King Jesus is all!
My all in all!"

Then there's the song, "All Hail King Jesus." I forgot this one was in our purple Chalice Praise book --

All hail King Jesus

All hail Emmanuel
King of kings
Lord of lords
Bright Morning Star
And for all eternity
I'm going to praise Him
And forevermore
I will reign with Him

Those songs and others laid the foundation for how I understand Jesus' role in God's reign and what it means to follow Jesus.

"Following," by definition means not being first, not being the leader, and not being in charge. That feels uncomfortable though because I was raised to value independence and self-sufficiency. We humans like being in control of our destiny, so when someone comes along and says, "I follow Jesus" or "Jesus is my Lord" there's a part of me that winces a little. But when I was baptized on November 18, 1984, I made a commitment to be Jesus' follower, just as Connor did today. Now that I think about it, I should have picked "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" as one of our hymns this morning. My favorite phrase in that song is, "no turning back, no turning back." Becoming a disciple starts with a change of course — redirecting our lives from self-focus to Christ. It means laying down our former allegiances and taking up a new one in him. What does it mean to yield our allegiance so that we live for Christ?

We started out today talking about Pope Pius' response to all of the "wanna-be Caesars" who were popping up all over Europe. Instituting the Feast of Christ the King was supposed to be a reminder to the churches of what it means to "yield our allegiance" and live only for Jesus. When Jesus came on to the scene in first century occupied Judea, Caesar Augustus was ruler of the Roman Empire. Augustus was the first official Roman emperor after the death of Julius Caesar. Some of the titles that the eastern provinces gave him were, "Lord, "Savior," "Benefactor" and even "Theos" – which is the Greek word for God. But

Augustus shied away from these kinds of titles because he never really wanted to be seen as a “king,” but hey, if those Greek-speaking folks out in the eastern territories wanted to call him that, more power to them. So long as they knew that he was boss, they could call him whatever they wanted.

But calling *Jesus* Lord and Savior was a different story. “Lord” was not just some harmless spiritual title. It was a challenge to Rome’s authority. To confess “Jesus is Lord” meant “Caesar is *not* Lord” —a claim that the empire could not accept, even while offering its subjects a token measure of religious freedom. To complicate matters, many of the Pharisees and other religious leaders in mainstream Judaism didn’t seem to have a problem with Caesar. Many of them enjoyed the perks and privileges that came along with being a part of that bundle of birch sticks – the fasces. And who could blame them?

One of the best scenes in the Monty Python movie, “The Life of Brian,” is about this Jewish resistance group that meets together to figure out how to fight against the Roman oppressors. The question they kept asking was, “What have the Romans ever done for us?” And there was this guy in the room who kept listing all the things that Rome did to improve their quality of life – Aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, public order, and relative peace. And no doubt, those were legitimate perks. But were they worth compromising your foundational religious values? One God above all, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.

One of the earliest confessions of the church was The Christ Hymn found in Philippians chapter 2. The last verse is, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

From the time of Emperor Nero and for 300 years afterward, Christians were persecuted because they refused to give the Roman emperors first place by calling them “Lord.” Why? Because, as our scripture reminds us this morning, Jesus has *first place in everything*. The opening line of our denomination’s affirmation of faith is, “As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the World.” That’s what Disciples do. We live for Jesus. Jesus has first place, full stop. No other leader, no other ruler, no other authority on earth surpasses this. And I understand how difficult this is. It’s probably one of the most difficult things about the Christian faith. As we discovered last week when we were talking about Isaiah’s description of God’s kingdom -- God’s values are not always in alignment with our values. Sometimes we want to shove them in the same box or make excuses for why God’s values don’t work “in the real world.” But when we commit to follow Jesus and allow him to be Lord in our lives, it’s important to remember his prayer -- “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

So, as we stand on the threshold of a new church year, Christ the King Sunday asks us the same question it asked the church in 1925, and the same question it asked the church in the first century: *Who is Lord?* We may not have Caesars or Kaisers or Czars, but we have *plenty* of contenders who want first place in our lives and hearts. But Paul reminds us: there is only one who holds all things together. Only one whose reign leads to life. Only one worthy of our allegiance. So as we begin again next week, may we decide again this week: Jesus has first place in everything. Not Caesar. Not the culture. Not our fears. Not even ourselves. Christ is King—and we live for him alone.