

Often we see artwork or statues of Jesus on the Cross with the letters INRI above his head. I've never mastered the Latin, so I usually have to look it up again! The Latin words are: **Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum...** (The I is like a J), and it means "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The Roman ruler Pontius Pilate put this inscription on the cross during his crucifixion.

But we hear in the gospel reading that Jesus did not call himself a "king." He answers Pilate with a question... "Are these *your* words, or did someone tell you I was a king?" And then later in the interrogation by Pilate, Jesus says "You say that I am a 'king'." Jesus underscored that *others* may have called him a king, and Pilate now is assuming he is king, but that he does not identify with being a "king" as kings were characterized then. Instead he jumps to a spiritual definition of "kingdom"... that is "*not of this world.*" And he says that his kind of "kingdom" has to do with Truth, speaking and listening to Truth. We know that Jesus' kind of Truth is that God (and by inference, a good king) cares for all who are hungry and thirsty, poor or oppressed, and seeks to lift them up.

In those days, and often now, kings and rulers were in power or stay in power because they kill off those who speak against them and resist them. They do not allow free speech and opposition. Hence, Jesus was killed, by the Roman government, and handed over to them by Jewish leaders. They just could not take any dissent, any disagreement, about the way God seeks to rule versus the way their society ruled. God's rule, in the ideal, is always about fairness and truth-telling, and helping the poor and liberating oppressed people.

The prophets of Israel were always challenging and chastising the kings and religious leaders! Listen to this sharp

challenge from Ezekiel in Chapter 34: *“Woe to you shepherds of Israel, who only take care of yourselves! You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.”* Or this from Isaiah 10:1-2...*“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed.”* The prophets were always talking about the coming of an *ideal* king, who would rule with justice and also with compassion. David was perhaps the most honored king of Israel, but we know full well his guilty conscience, how he stole a soldier's wife, Bathsheba, and then had the man killed by sending him to the front lines of war!

Yes, kings are human beings so naturally they have shortcomings and failings. David, at least was public and transparent about his big sin (see Psalm 51), and had a penitent and remorseful heart. So Jesus did not identify with the title of King and the way kings rule. He uses the word more metaphorically and spiritually; he said that his leadership, his authority, his “kingdom” had to do with Truth and “testifying to the Truth.” We do well to recall that Jesus referred to the Devil as the “Father of lies.” Jesus and those in the “Kingdom of God” tell the truth.

A while back, I was introduced to some spiritual recordings from a publishing company called “Sounds True.” Naturally, the recordings deal with many spiritual paths, people are invited to listen and discern if the teachings sound true! I think this is what Jesus meant when he said *“Everyone who belongs to the Truth listens to my voice.”* Yes, Jesus is elevating himself here, speaking of his own divine nature, but he is also going to a deep

spiritual place that we could say is *interfaith*... the quality of belonging to the Truth! It's like saying everyone has a conscience, and thus can really know deep inside what is good and true and what is not! It reminds me of when Jesus said "*there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, nothing concealed that will not be brought out into the open.*" Jesus also said: "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light" (They do not hide or cover up their actions).

So when Christians celebrate this Sunday as "Christ the King" Sunday, and the book of Revelation says that Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth, I say, fine... that is great testimony of the Christ we know in our hearts, but we need to be careful with our language, and be clear about what is True. Theologians for many decades now have emphasized the "Already and Not Yet" aspect of our faith. Jesus has "already" been victorious over the rulers of this world, in his steadfastness for peace and justice, but... these things have "not yet" come to be for most of the world. This is the end of the Christian year, the "Reign of Christ" Sunday, but...the rulers of this world still make death and destruction and despair everywhere! Jesus already reigns, in our hearts, and in the ultimate victory of goodness over evil, but... the devils of this world are still woefully active!

I'd like to revisit the words of the late congressman John Lewis, younger follower of Martin Luther King Jr, and thus a follower of Jesus Christ. He has a very convincing testimony about the *reign of Christ*, about the reality of Christ's rule even in times of great woe, like that "Bloody Sunday" in Selma Alabama, as they marched for civil rights, especially the right to vote. John Lewis talks about the "already, not yet" truth and reality of Jesus' Lordship. *When I was 11 years old, I traveled one summer with an*

*uncle and aunt from rural Alabama to Buffalo for a visit. I had never been outside of the south. And being there gave me hope. I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that things will get better. Later, I discovered that you have to have this sense of faith that what you are moving toward is already done. It's already happened. And you live as if you are already there, that you are already in a beloved community, that sense of one family. If you visualize it, if you can have faith that it is there, for you, it is already there. Within the movement, we did become a circle of trust, a band of brothers and sisters. It didn't matter whether you were black or white. It didn't matter whether you came from the north or the south; we were one.*

This is a vision of the “Kingdom of God:” There can be beloved community, love for neighbor. We can indeed be one, one family on earth. It is *already* a possibility, but... it is also idealistic, surely *not yet* realized. Jesus prayed for this kind of kingdom, this kind of community among all God’s children; we recall well his words at the Last Supper, which is on the logo of the United Church of Christ... Jesus prayed “that they may all be one.” Jesus is praying for his disciples at that last supper, but we know it is also a prayer for the entire world... (“God so loved *the world.*”) Jesus reigns over every earthly power, but it is not a rule of domination, not a reign of force. Jesus’ kingdom, not of this world (and *not yet* realized in this world), will always be the power of truth and justice and mercy... *with merciful love, compassionate love, having the final word.* Amen.