Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Thus the point of point three: We understand Christ as our King when we understand and do our best to work for his vision of the Kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to envision the kingdom of God, not to focus on the title of king.

In a few weeks we will be singing together, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” When you sing the words, “Glory to the newborn king,” what kind of kingdom will you mean? Amen.
life from his very birth. The Gospel of Matthew contains this famous passage: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’” And then some less-famous words that we like to skip over on Christmas Eve: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod called for the wise men who were to visit the baby Jesus and he told them: “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” The wise men, and Joseph, too, knew that Herod didn’t want to pay homage to Jesus. He wanted to kill him—this baby king. Herod’s fear and anger about another king in his kingdom led him to order the slaughter of all of the babies in and around Bethlehem. Herod was afraid that one of those children might usurp his power. Thus the point of point two: When Jesus is given the title of king, it is seen as a threat to worldly power and it usually leads to trouble. And make no mistake: if Jesus’ vision did succeed, it would be a threat to kings in power—not directly, but because he would turn all understandings of power and privilege upside down.

And finally point three for making sense of Jesus as king: While Jesus was unwilling to use the language of king for himself, he was not at all reluctant to use the language of God’s kingdom, or the reign of God. Jesus had come to talk about and to work for this alternative kingdom, or realm, or reign, that was modeled not only by his servant leadership, but also by preferential care for people in need, whatever kind of need. This new kingdom of God was not based on self-interest, or power politics, or greed, or corruption, as Herod’s kingdom was.

What kind of a king is Jesus? It is better to ask, What does Jesus’ kingdom look like? Here is Jesus’ own vision:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

And the final 2 beatitudes that describes so well how Jesus lives his life, and dies, too, in his work to realize God’s kingdom.
written one of the most interesting books I know on Jesus, called *Jesus Through the Centuries*, that shows how the titles we give to Jesus—and the ways that we have portrayed him in literature, music, and in art—have varied with time and place over the past two thousand years. We tend to see and describe and portray Jesus in terms that are most relevant for our times.

The task for today is to try to understand “what kind of king” we mean when we declare that Jesus Christ is king. So I offer three points that can help us make sense of this title.

Point One: The placement of Christ the King Sunday in the Christian calendar gives us a good idea of how to understand Christ as king. Next Sunday is Advent, the beginning of a new Christian year. We start a new Christian year by awaiting and then celebrating God’s incarnation—breaking into human history and our very own lives—in the form of the birth of baby Jesus. What kind of king is this Jesus? We get a strong hint when we remember that Christ the King Sunday closes or culminates or completes the Christian calendar. While human history ebbs and flows with earthly kings and presidents and elections and recounts, God in Jesus Christ remains the source of our life and our being and our hope. Hear again today’s reading from the Book of Revelation: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, … and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” … and a few verses later: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Jesus Christ is a king and lord in the sense that he stands above all kings and above the fray of human history (even as he works within our lives). In brief, the point of point one is this: “Christ as King” makes no sense unless we also say, “Christ is risen; He is risen indeed.” All of human history is seen and even judged in light of the resurrection of Jesus, which signifies the eternal and permanent victory of life over all forms of death. This profession of Christ as our King “relativizes” all of our everyday hustle and bustle within a much broader view of what our real priorities are.

Point two for making sense of Christ as King: Every time that Christ’s kingship is misinterpreted as a worldly kingdom, it leads to trouble. Jesus does not call himself king, and he does not seek power for himself or his movement. In everyday terms, “servant leader” is a much better description of Jesus than is “king”—unless we turn the very notion of king on its head. We should remember that Jesus is crucified under the inscription, written in three languages for all to see, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” King-talk is violence-talk. As we head into Advent and then Christmas, we should remember that seeing Jesus as king threatens his
What are we supposed to make of this famous encounter between Pilate, who is a governor of a province of the Roman Empire, and Jesus, who defies all of our labels? It is a confrontation between the one who has all of the symbols of worldly political power and the One who offers a completely new vision of power. Jesus never calls himself a king. Indeed, throughout the gospels Jesus criticizes the powerful and people with titles—both the religious leaders and the political leaders—all of whom have been co-opted into serving an unjust and ruthless Roman empire. Jesus never asks to be king.

The very notion of “king” conflicts for us with our understandings of a democratic government. Last week, I received an unusual email message, with the name of the sender listed not as “R. Charles Grant,” or “Elvin Nicely” or “Dan Ream”—(three frequent emailers in our congregation). The sender’s name was listed as “Her Sovereign Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.” Her message read:

*To the citizens of the United States of America,*

*Following your failure to elect a candidate as President of the USA to govern yourselves and, by extension, the free world, I hereby give notice of the revocation of your independence. I, Queen Elizabeth II, will resume a monarch’s duties over all states, commonwealths and other territories of these United States, effective immediately.*

Democrats and Republicans may not agree on much, but they agree that this would be a bad idea.

So I have a confession to make. It strikes me as perplexing every time we celebrate Christ the King in the Christian calendar. Didn’t Jesus, after all, again and again reject the title of king for himself? I must admit that I take some satisfaction from the fact that Christ the King Sunday often gets lost, anyway, because it comes just before Advent, and it always competes with the American holiday of Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving story creates another irony: The Pilgrims had fled the persecution of King James I of England and traveled, via Holland, to Plymouth Rock, in search of religious freedom. Kings do not fare favorably in the American Thanksgiving story, either. Yet, we insist at this time of year on calling Jesus Christ our King, even when kings aren’t held up as good role-models.

So that is my confession: I don’t always understand why we as Christians make so much effort to celebrate Christ as our King. In all seriousness, wouldn’t we be better off with Christ’s other titles—including Messiah or chosen one, savior, shepherd, Suffering Servant, liberator, and Lord? It is worth a whole host of Sundays to struggle with the titles that we ascribe to Jesus Christ in our worship. The scholar Jaroslav Pelikan has
Last year I preached a sermon right after Thanksgiving. (This seems to be a popular Sunday for parish associates to preach.) I talked about dear old Great Aunt Margaret, that distant relative whom we see only at the holidays. Great Aunt Margaret may talk too much, and eat too much, and squeeze your cheeks too much, but she is still family. Thanksgiving is like communion in that way: We don’t choose the people with whom we share the meal.

This year, because of Presidential politics and the election, it may also have been clear that we don’t get to choose the political parties of the people with whom we share Thanksgiving dinner. I was thinking this week that the fighting over Florida had the potential to ruin Thanksgiving dinner for families all over America. I hope you and your families had the good sense to avoid talking about Bush, Gore, and the entire state of Florida.

Much like CNN in recent days, our scripture lessons this morning talk about politics. There is no mention of recounts, or campaigns, or even issues that matter to citizens or subjects of the Roman Empire. But the focus is on perhaps the most political word of the Bible: King. Today is Christ the King Sunday. But what kind of king?

In the Gospel of John, we come face to face with one of the most vivid confrontations in all of the Bible: Pontius Pilate meets Jesus.

Pilate gets straight to the point. His first question to Jesus, according to all four gospels, is this: “Are you the king of the Jews?” In three gospels, Jesus responds, “You say so.” (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:2) John’s stories are always more wordy than the other gospels. “Are you the king of the Jews?” According to John, Jesus wants to know first if Pilate is asking this on his own or if others have told Pilate about him. In other words, Jesus wants to know if he is being framed, or set up, by this question. Of course, it is a set-up. But Jesus finally answers, “My kingdom is not from this world; if my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting for me. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” (v. 36) Pilate asks again: “So you are a king then?” Jesus answers: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”