SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — November 23, 2025

Today's sermon is a lightly edited version of Diana Butler Bass's "Sunday Musings" for November 22, 2025, which can be found at: https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/christ-the-no-kings-Sunday

CHRIST (THE) NO KINGS SUNDAY

One thing has messed up Christianity more than any other single problem — the desire of Christians for a king.

If you consider the inquisitions, crusades, heresy hunts, persecutions, and wars conducted by a religion claiming the Prince of Peace as its savior, the problem of human kings seems obvious. For about 1,600 years — ever since Christians hailed the Emperor Constantine as the "Thirteenth Apostle" — the church founded by and for the poor has constantly given in to the temptation we've catalogued through the middle section of Luke, namely, temptations of worldly wealth and power. Exemplified in human kings.

I had come to the point that I've started calling the Festival Reign of Christ Sunday, instead of Christ the King Sunday, because kings are increasingly becoming things of the past. But authoritarians and would-be tyrants still come along, and I find myself at a "No Kings" rally. The real issue is not relocating, redefining, or reconstructing the language or imagery of kings and kingdoms — the problem is kings. Period. Throughout human history, kings are the problem.

An image actually posted by the White House social media accounts on October 18, 2025

The story of *Jesus'* kingship, which we celebrate today, cannot be understood separate from the story of Jewish kings. In the period after the exodus from being enslaved in Egypt, the people of Israel had been ruled by "Judges." Then, one day, the elders of Israel ask God for a king to rule over them. The prophet Samuel insisted that was a bad idea. But God finally relented and directed Samuel to tell the people how their desire will turn out:

> Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day."
>
> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." (1 Sam 8:10-20)

God says, "No Kings." The people insist on kings. In return, God says, "You won't like it. There will be constant wars, your women will not be safe, there will be rank corruption, your taxes will be high, and "you will be his slaves. Kings are a curse." Again, they insist, "Give us a king. We like kings. We want to

be like the other nations."

God had proposed to Israel to be a different kind of community, to be organized with principles unlike those of other nations. To be a revolutionary sort of society based upon sabbath and Jubilee, where each person lived in peace and safety under their own vine and fig tree. But nope. Revolution was too hard. "We want to be like other nations." And therein is the problem. Make us like the other empires. Make us wealthy, powerful, admired, and envied. Make us great — and even greater than we've ever been. Give us a king.

Fast forward more than a thousand years: Jesus spent his entire ministry preaching about the "Kingdom of God," or the "Reign of the Age to Come." Before he was even born, his mother described it — "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Her son would teach that the poor, the mournful, the infirm, the hungry, and the persecuted were the "big shots" (the "blessed") of the Kingdom. He'd say that serving "the king" was serving all these people, those whom the world discarded as "the least of these." On the night before he was executed, Jesus got on his knees and washed the filthy feet of his itinerant band, insisting that God no longer saw them as servants but as friends. And, throughout his teaching, he echoed his mother's prophecy whenever he said, "the first shall be last; and the last, first."

If Jesus is a King, this is the weirdest "kingship" ever not-known to human history. Humans believe that kings are better than everyone else — divinely appointed, whatever. They are "above" us for our good, to rule over us. Kings are part of a hierarchy of creation; and hierarchy needs kings. But Jesus undid hierarchy, invited everyone to a shared table, and proclaimed liberation from debt and forgiveness from sins. The kingdom he envisioned was one of human solidarity, non-violence, and shared goods. As the oldest creed in Christianity said, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ."

After his death, Christians tried it — for a little while at least. This revolutionary vision proved popular with outcasts and slaves and women and the poor. They made their ironic (and even trolling) slogan, "Jesus is Lord," which was another way of saying, "Jesus is our Emperor!" They refused to worship false kings — and, of course, that meant they refused to worship any human king at all. The powerful were not impressed and saw these bands of religious radicals as a political threat. You know the result — lions and coliseums and the like. It wasn't pleasant.

Eventually, the radicals adapted, slowly and surely. "Jesus is Lord," came literally to mean "Jesus is just like Caesar!" Romans liked the idea of keeping their earthly Caesar and having a heavenly Caesar in his image. A kingly Jesus, reshaped into a Roman emperor and approved of by Roman emperors suited them just fine. A Christian Empire needs an Imperial Deity after all.

God said, "No Kings." The people said, "Give us a king." "No. It is a bad idea. There will be wars, injustice, economic inequality, and slavery. That's what always happens." "Well," the people replied, "if you won't give us a king we like, we'll create one instead."

Christ the King Sunday is the final Sunday of the Christian year. We end with a tale of tragic irony — how a people called to love and justice made a Caesar-Jesus for themselves. We turned God's dream of No Kings into the King we thought we wanted. And we've been living with crusaders and heresy hunters and warrior rulers and pretenders and Christian nationalists ever since.

But the calendar circles back on itself. A new year beckons. We begin the story all over again. Maybe this year we'll get it right. Let's return to the ideals of the Jesus revolution. I hope the moral at the end of the story haunts us through the coming months: No kings. No kings! Revolution awaits. Amen