

Christ the King

John 18: 33-37

Nov. 22, 2015

“We are the Kingdom”

Today’s Scripture readings offer visions of the kingdom of God. Two weeks ago the Women’s Group topic was The Kingdom of God. Our discussion was occasioned by a reflection in Day by Day which invited us to explore our childhood concepts and beliefs and how these had changed. We were surprised to discover that none of us really had a childhood concept of the Kingdom of God, and that as our faith matured we were only beginning to envision what that expression, Kingdom of God, might mean.

So today, Christ the King Sunday, I wonder about the rest of you. What is your vision of the Kingdom of God? In what way is it here, but not yet? Is the kingdom here, given the violence in the world around us?

In 2 Samuel, the kingdom of God is understood as the earthly kingdom arising out of the Covenant that God established with David. King David, the greatest of the kings of Israel, is a just monarch who ruled in fear of God, whose people prospered because of David’s Covenant with God. 2 Samuel 23:1-7. The setting of the Gospel reading – a small section of the passion narrative – is the Judean kingdom of Jewish King Herod Antipas, who owes his allegiance to the Roman Empire, not to God; the Davidic covenant is long forgotten. Then, there is the kingdom of Christ as Jesus describes it to Pilate. Finally, there is the glimpse of kingdom in the Revelation of John.

We read only a small section of the Gospel narrative of the passion today. I want to expand our consideration of the passion to help bring Christ’s explanation of the Kingdom into better focus.

Nearly two thousand years later, it is impossible to accurately reconstruct how the passion events unfolded. John’s is the most complete of the Gospel accounts. Still, it was written fifty or so years after the event, and written for a Christian faith community in conflict with the Jewish community living beside it, and the author undoubtedly emphasized some aspects over others.

The author of John presents the passion as the triumphal progress of Jesus towards the Father. Jesus knows that he is going to die, what kind of death it will be, and he goes to it freely. ‘No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.’ John 10:18.

The Roman trial of Jesus is the principal scene in John’s passion. It occurs at the time of the annual Passover celebration – Jerusalem is overflowing with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims celebrating ancient Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. The Romans are not popular leaders and so Pilate, the Roman governor, has brought in many Roman legions for crowd control during the Passover.

The trial is portrayed as a series of comings and goings: Pilate goes back and forth from inside the Praetorium – Pilate’s headquarters – where Jesus is being held, to the outer courtyard where the Judean religious leaders are assembled. There are seven matching scenes, with the crowning of Jesus with thorns at their center. The scene which we read today takes place after Jesus has been turned over to the Roman authorities by Caiaphas, the high priest. It is the first encounter between Jesus and Pilate,

The Judean religious leaders – called the Sanhedren or “the Jews” in John’s Gospel – want Jesus killed, but under Roman law they lack the power to do it themselves. To avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat at the Passover, the Jews do not enter Pilate’s headquarters. They remain standing outside in the courtyard and make their demands from there. It is an odd sort of trial – the accused inside, the accusers outside, and the judge running back and forth.

There are large crowds of pilgrims standing outside with the Judean religious leaders, and in a show of military strength, there are also many Roman legions. That assemblage – Judean religious leaders, pilgrims, and Roman legions – is politically explosive. Pilate’s primary job is to maintain order and quash any riots that might be stirred up.

Pilate seeks to verify the vague charges on which Jesus has been brought before him. It appears that Jesus has been turned over for Roman trial because of his identity, not for something he has done. Jesus’ identity frames Pilate’s ultimate question. *Are you the king of the Jews? ...Your own nation and the chief priest have handed you over to me.* If Jesus claims to be the king, that technicality could be a capital offense, allowing Pilate to condemn Jesus and satisfy the Jewish leaders who have brought Jesus to him for trial. The question, though, makes a farce of the Roman rule of law and justice.

Jesus avoids the title of King of the Jews. Jesus says his kingdom is a different concept. He begins with an explanation: kingdoms of this world insist upon their own sovereignty – except through war, no outside power can depose their leaders. Jesus says, ‘if the kingdom I proclaim were a kingdom in the temporal world, I would not have been handed over by my followers without a fight.’ Jesus makes no claim, then, to be ‘the king of the Jews’, no threat to Rome or Judea..

Jesus gives further testimony about his identity. *‘I came into this world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice’.* Pilate responds, *‘What is truth?’* 18:38.

Pilate then goes back outside to the Judean religious leaders with his verdict, saying *“I find no case against him.”* The trial should have ended there, but there will be more: trial by flogging, the crown of thorns, the aggressive demands of the Judean religious leaders as Pilate continues to go back and forth from the courtyard to the inside of the Praetorium. Ultimately, Jesus is crucified as ‘the king of the Jews.’

To Pilate, truth is the intellectual evidence of the trial; Jesus has done nothing wrong. Pilate misses what Jesus actually says. The answer to the question 'who is Jesus' is this: he is the revelation of the truth, he is Truth incarnate.

To Pilate, king and kingship are earthbound concepts, physical power, hierarchy and geographic boundaries. But Jesus' kingdom is not defined by these earthly terms, it is not the kingdom of David, nor is it a militant rival threatening the kingship of Herod or the Roman Empire.

Jesus' kingdom is not an imaginary concept. Many sayings of Jesus begin 'the kingdom is like.' Here Jesus speaks directly: Jesus' kingdom *is* a community of believers who hear and obey his voice.

John later writes in Revelation that “ *[Jesus] made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father...*” Rev. 1: 4b . *We* are the kingdom.

The Kingdom as a sphere of belief, as listening to the Truth as revealed in Jesus is difficult to grasp, not concrete like the Davidic kingdom of God based on the ruler's covenant. The 'kingdom as us' is a weighty responsibility. Christ's Kingdom is our collective participation in a community which transcends the self, which transcends geographic boundaries or hierarchies or physical powers. The kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is present, wherever we experience healing and restoration.

When I last preached, I asked you to think about the vulnerable as you listen to Scripture. At the Roman trial, the vulnerable one is not Jesus. The vulnerable are the crowds, and those who have been following Jesus. The vulnerable are the subjects of the Roman empire and King Herod. They are outside in the courtyard, surrounded by the menacing Roman legions and the Judean religious leaders prosecuting Jesus.

The crowds do not know what is being said, inside, by Jesus – perhaps he is naming his supporters, pleading to avoid death. They are caught in the psychology of wanting to be on the 'right side' of things when it all goes down. They are likely terrified of being identified with Jesus the revolutionary. Even Peter denies knowing Jesus!

When Pilate offers to let Jesus go, it is quite likely fear of being on the wrong side of the Jewish and Roman authorities which causes the crowds to shout , “Not this man, but Barabbas”. (John 18: 39-40, the verses following today's reading).

Crowd psychology is about being on the winning side, not about being 'right' or moral or just. Financier Jim Rickards recently commented, “We would rather be wrong in a herd than right on our own.” Money Morning, Nov. 19, 2015. We know that after any election, a greater number of people claim to have voted for the winning candidate than actually did vote for that candidate. A unanimous verdict of guilty is required in a murder trial. There are very few 'not guilty' verdicts in which only one juror vote forces the not guilty verdict. Researchers of jury

dynamics find that few persist in a solo position – eventually they join the majority voice, making possible those unanimous verdicts of guilty.

Jesus remained true to his ethic of non-violence. Today, Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate that his kingdom is where we already are, without boundaries of place or ethnicity or temporal power. We are the kingdom: we who hear and listen to Jesus' message of God's forgiveness, grace and love. Yes, the kingdom is wherever Jesus is present, and wherever we experience healing and restoration. That's good news.

How does the kingdom exist side by side with today's mass shootings and bombings, hostage takings and killings that resound across the world, cutting across borders, religious and ethnic divisions? Are we the vulnerable crowd, watching and being watched?

The newspapers recently used an expression in connection with the bombings in Paris: *slactivism*. The media applied this term to people who, having visited Paris at one time or another, have now posted their tourist 'selfies' to illustrate their 'solidarity' with the French people. This is a 'no action required,' 'all about me' response. Slactivism generates neither healing nor restoration.

Slactivism is the opposite of activism. Activism would not allow Paris blood to be traded for blood elsewhere – whether among the immigrant and refugee communities of Europe or among peoples living in the war torn Middle East. Activism does not trivialize the suffering. We have to ask the question, whether the war on terror feeds terror, alongside those questions posed by our Bishop Greg: Who do we mourn? What do we mourn? Did our lack of attention to deadly explosions in Baghdad and Beirut on the same day have anything to do with the victims there being 'other', or with their religion, their ethnicity?

Why is our country dividing over whether to accept refugees, and if we do, whether they should be only Christian refugees?

I think it comes down to this. Are you a slactivist, or an activist in the Kingdom of God?

Let us advance the moral narrative and organize for peace and justice. We must not be like Pilate, bowing to the political expedient of maintaining order. We must not be like the crowds reacting out of fear and herd mentality.

The transforming work of the Kingdom requires us to look deeply at what is right and wrong in our actions and attitudes toward others and within ourselves. Let us listen wisely, and look beyond what we think, what we intellectualize 'from the evidence' – to the Truth that Jesus reveals: the love and grace of God.

The Truth is something that is done, acted out and acted upon, rather than simply believed or thought of.

Christ's reign on earth is made visible through those who hear and obey the Christ. We are the kingdom. *Amen*

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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