



Sunday, November 24, 2024

Christ the King

John 18:33-37

"In the World But Not Of the World"

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The temptation for the preacher today is to add the next verse to the assigned reading. You know what it is, right? What follows "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice"?

... "Pilate asked him,...."What is truth?" A moment that has been called one of the most critical in all of the Fourth Gospel. The temptation is to add that verse and then make IT the focus of the sermon. I know pastors who are doing this. And there is certainly a lot that can be said, especially in today's world, about what is truth and what isn't.

To do so, however, would divert us from the pressing question this reading lays before us: To whom do we give our authority, and why?

In the verses of John 18 we are given each year on what the church calls Christ the King Sunday, Pilate reluctantly finds himself in the position of having to determine whether Jesus should live or die. Jesus has been arrested as a political criminal, but Pilate isn't convinced he's guilty. The easiest way out he can see is to trap Jesus into a statement that confirms that Jesus and his followers are aligned against the emperor.

At that time in the Roman Empire, the emperor commanded complete political, economic, religious, and military authority. Crucifixion was the favored means of punishing those who openly defied the Emperor in any of these ways. The lengthy and horrifying spectacle was thought to discourage others from speaking up or speaking out against prevailing policies.

When Pilate summons Jesus to his headquarters he probably imagines it will be over quickly. After all, Jesus was hailed by the huge crowd as the King of Israel when he entered Jerusalem just a few days earlier. So Pilate imagines his first question would seal the deal. "Are you King of the Jews?" Jesus: "Yes." Pilate: "Then off you go. We have no king but the emperor."

But Jesus outmaneuvers him deftly. Are you asking this for yourself or on behalf of others? Pilate: How would I know anything about who you are? I'm just taking what was handed to me. What have you done? Why are you even here?

Jesus explains that while the forces that brought him to trial were political, the kingdom he is speaking of has nothing to do with the world and its systems of power and domination. After all, his followers didn't even mount any resistance when he was taken prisoner. "My kingdom is not from this world." But all Pilate can hear is "kingdom." "Aha – so you ARE some kind of king, then?" Jesus to Pilate: "Yes – as you say." But his purpose, his incarnation, his mission is not to rule over others but to testify to the truth. And just like the sheep in John 10 who belong to the fold because they know their master's voice, everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice.

Pilate cannot comprehend what Jesus is saying because he's able to think of a kingdom only in the political sense of a system beholden to absolute authority at the top. But we, Jesus' followers, know what kind of kingdom he's talking about, because we know Jesus. Year after year, cycle after

cycle, we have followed him through the four gospels, from his baptism in the Jordan through the calling of the first disciples, through the healings, miracles, and radical acts of love that surprised even his closest friends, to the climax of his ministry that we reach at this point each year. Jesus has been showing us in every way imaginable what the Kingdom of God is like – this kingdom that IS in the world, because we are living it, but is not of the world.

Because Jesus belongs to what is above, he alone can testify to the truth. He is the embodiment of truth, and his death will be the supreme testimony to that.

What does this mean for us? In place of an authoritarian, top-down structure, God's kingdom orders the activity of all creation, including human life, around the central reality that GOD IS LOVE. This is the animating principle. God created the universe and all that is in it out of love. In love, God gives all creatures everything they need to be sustained and live fully. In gratitude for this fullness of life, God's creatures return this same love to their Creator – not just in kind, but in greater measure. Isn't this the reason for creation in the first place? What else explains it?

Because we have freedom of choice, and because we have been created in God's image, we have been given a Savior to lead us back to God when wander away. We know and follow his voice because he speaks the truth in love. Our Savior embodies God's love. Because Jesus IS from God, because he was the Word that was with God at the beginning, we trust that wherever he leads us is where God wants us to be. This continuum of love given and received is what animates the kingdom that Pilate can't fathom, the kingdom which is not from this world.

It's no surprise that Pilate is clueless, because this kingdom is known only to those who live by the universal principle of love. The world's kingdoms are animated not by love but human pride. The quest for absolute authority. The hunger to dominate. The thirst for control. The relentless insistence on unchecked power. How do these forces gain a foothold? Only when fear has gotten the upper hand and the individual, trusting in nothing else, turns in on itself. Martin Luther understood this as the classic definition of sin, the soul curves in on itself, the soul that is only self-concerned. In such a vacuum, fear rushes in and the human spirit is crushed.

If you ever find yourself feeling that darkness is closing in, recall this bold encounter between Jesus and his executioner where he reveals what his kingdom is by affirming what it isn't. Jesus came to show us, in Paul's words, a "yet more excellent way." All we need to do is hold fast to the truth that love is the strongest force in the universe. Affirm love as your ultimate authority.

I understand that this can be challenging when darkness seems to be getting the upper hand. In this event, start small. On Christ the King Sunday in Year A, Jesus tells us how it will go at his final return:

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you...and did all these things?

Start with simple acts of love such as these. Someone who needs a hand. Someone for whom a kind word or simple act of compassion could make a world of difference. Or maybe just someone who needs a friendly face to gaze into. It is of simple bricks such as these that the kingdom of love is built, the kingdom that is in the world but not of the world, the kingdom that has no end. All this depends on you. Don't miss a chance to place a brick. CKE – Choose Kindness Everywhere. Amen.