

Feast of Christ the King – November 26, 2006
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
John 18:33-37 – Pilate Questions Jesus

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Before I begin, let me say that I see sermons as simply a form of Bible study, an opportunity for us to examine together one or more appointed readings. I regret that they tend to take the form of lecture – that is, I talk, you listen – and are not true dialogue, and so I must tell you that nothing would please me more than to have you say to me “I really disagreed with your sermon today, and here’s why,” or “I really agreed with what you had to say.”

Remember, you have an obligation to train me the right way – so speak up! With that said...

From the Gospel: “*Are you the King of the Jews?*”

We are at the last of a series of Sundays called “kingdomtide” – the lead-up to Advent which is, of course, the preparation for Christmas.

Today is celebrated in the church calendar as the Feast of Christ the King. It’s a relatively new feast day, proclaimed only eighty-six years ago.¹ The feast takes its name from today’s Gospel reading, and from the sign which was posted on the cross used to crucify Jesus, a sign which proclaimed him “King of the Jews.”

Today’s Gospel recounts a conversation between two men who looked at the world in very different ways. One of the men was Pontius Pilate, who is probably the only governor of a part of the Roman Empire that any of us can name.

¹ In 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

We know him because, through an accident of history, he happened to be the governor before whom Jesus was brought, on trumped-up charges, to be judged. He has gained a dubious immortality by being named in the Nicene Creed, in which Christians for centuries have said “and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.”

I can imagine Pilate talking to his wife over dinner after his conversation with Jesus of Nazareth, and saying something like “I met the most amazing fellow at work today. He was brought in by the Jews, and you know how they can be. They were all excited, demanding that I try him and condemn him to death. They claimed this Jesus was a threat to the Empire, that he was the ‘King of the Jews.’

“I had him brought in before me, and if you’d seen him, you would have known he wasn’t a king. But you know, he claimed to have a kingdom, only it wasn’t like the kingdoms you and I know about. His claim was that he was born to tell the truth, and that his followers would listen to and seek that truth.”

When Jesus is brought before him, Pilate wants to send him back to be dealt with by the local authorities. Pilate quickly realizes that, whatever this man is, he is no threat to Roman rule. And the reason is that Jesus doesn’t carry any of the attributes that Pilate associates with kingship. Pilate knows something about earthly kings, and Jesus is not like them.

And Jesus makes no claim of earthly kingship. In fact at one point, he runs from it. Earlier in Saint John’s Gospel, following the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, someone in the crowd says that Jesus has to be the messiah, the one foretold by the prophets. And so we read in John, chapter 6, verse 15, “¹⁵ When Jesus realized

that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”²

And so it is that Jesus, I think, would have agreed with Pilate’s assessment of him. Jesus really was no threat to Rome. He had no soldiers, no army to fight the Romans, not even a sword. I have a certain sympathy for Pilate, who is faced with either doing something he knows to be unjust, or allowing a riot to occur. He takes the easy way out – one more dead Jewish preacher is hardly going to make a difference in his world – and a riot will do nothing for his career.

Sometimes, I fear, we are like Pilate, misunderstanding God’s kingdom because it does not match our own ideas.

The idea of “kingdom” runs throughout our scripture. We pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We sing “Thy Kingdom come oh Lord, thy rule, oh Christ begin.” We “walk the King’s highway.”

We are kingdom people. It’s unlikely we would rename our church a “Kingdom Hall,” but such it is.

So what is God’s kingdom? What does it mean to acknowledge “Christ the King”? What makes God’s kingdom different?

The other lessons for today, as well as the collect, speak directly to the question.

From the Book of Daniel: “I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jn 6:15

should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”³

This is the kingdom of God. Unlike that of earthly kings, it has no ending. Earthly rulers come and earthly rulers go, but they are all frail human beings, and in the end, they succumb to something. Indeed, the Roman Empire, which Pilate so proudly served, is no more, and all that is visible of it are some ruined buildings, an occasional road, and a dead language.

There is another characteristic of human kings, which is that we are their subjects without having much choice in the matter. We are subjugated to our rulers. It is in the nature of the subjects of human kings to bear the burden of slavery, but Jesus does not call us to that bondage.

In the Epistle today, from the Revelation to John, “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, ... ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”⁴

It is this Kingdom of God to which we are called, not only in the future, but here and now. We have all been re-created in the death to sin and new life we experience in baptism. We are released from our old bondage, as we are called to be the creatures God intends us to be, who worship and serve him in perfected freedom.

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Da 7:13

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Re 1:4

It is the prayer of all of God's faithful people, as today's collect has it, that God "...grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under [Jesus'] most gracious rule."

And it is the job of us all, and the job of each one of us, through the grace of God, and for the love of Jesus, to do the work we are called to do. The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ free us from the bondage in which we once lived. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we re-live that magnificent emancipation as we claim the place prepared for us in the Kingdom of God.

And in thanksgiving for that, with each moment of our lives, with each breath we take, we have the opportunity to reflect to others the meaning of salvation as it has overtaken each of us. It is important that we see the Kingdom clearly, not as Pilate did, not as a source of power or pride for ourselves, but as an opportunity for service to others.

In terms of the world, my friends, we here in this small church, in this small community, are probably not very significant beings. But in terms of God's kingdom, we are part of a mighty army of the saints of God. As our hymn puts it:

"I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green; they were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one too.

"They loved their Lord so dear, so dear, and his love made them strong; and they followed the right for Jesus' sake the whole of their good lives long. And one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast; and there's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.

“They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, in church, by the sea, in the house next door; they are saints of God, whether rich or poor, and I mean to be one too.”⁵

God means for us all to do our part to bring the Good News of his kingdom to the part of his world in which we live. It is my hope that we, together, will renew our commitment to that calling and to that journey. This is my first time in your pulpit, and I am grateful to you for allowing me to be here. I can think of no better time in the church year to begin our companionship along the King's highway.

We are about to enter Advent, a season of preparation for Christmas. We will now tell through the mechanism of the church year, the story of God's kingdom people. We will celebrate the miraculous acts of God, who intervenes on this earth to send his only son to live, and die, and to rise again from the dead, all for us, all so that we may join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in the place where Christ is King.

Let us find time, during this coming Advent, to prepare ourselves to know the place God has prepared for each of us, and to share with others the grace we have been given. We are all here for a reason, and each of us has been given gifts to share with one another. No one of us alone can do the job, but as Kingdom people, we can show others – and each other – the love of Christ which is in us.

“You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, in church, by the sea, in the house next door,” and when you do, I urge you to greet them in the name of the risen Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come.” *Amen.*

⁵ The Hymnal 1982, © 1985 The Church Pension Fund, Hymn 293, words by Lesbia Scott (b. 1898).