

November 22, 2009

John 18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Sermon by Susi Kawolics

Today we have come to the end of our liturgical year – next week we begin the new year with Advent. The church year always ends with Christ's triumph, with the celebration of Christ the King Sunday. As I was reflecting on the readings for this week, it just so happened that my daughter was sitting at the table with me. She looked up from the online survey on her computer and said to me, "Alright Mom, who do you think is King? Elvis or Michael Jackson?" This threw me for a moment, since I was thinking of Jesus as King, and that was not one of the choices. My daughter and I were obviously not on the same wavelength, not speaking the same language when it came to the word King. We had two radically different definitions.

This is the same problem that Jesus had with Pilate. The Jews had handed Jesus over to Pilate, saying he claimed to be King of the Jews. And Pilate interrogated him about this. Jesus, not surprisingly, answered the questions rather enigmatically. He never really says whether he is or isn't – but rather that Pilate does not understand what the Kingdom of God is all about, does not understand that there is a difference between the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of the Romans.

Perhaps it seems a bit odd to read about what happens on Good Friday when we are getting ready for Advent. On the other hand, maybe this is altogether appropriate for today– for this week this country is gearing up not for Good Friday, but for Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, the biggest shopping day of the year. This is the day retail stores hope to get out of the red and into the black. But as I was thinking about this, I couldn't help remembering what happened last year on Black Friday, an incident that shows that we, like Pilate, still do not understand, and are not living in, the Kingdom of God. Perhaps you recall the story last year of the young man in New York who was trampled to death by over-zealous shoppers.

Jdmytai Damour was a 34 year old man, working for Wal-mart. He was standing inside the store with his fellow employees on Black Friday, listening to the shouts of the mob of 2000 people yelling "Push the doors in." As he and the others in the store grew more and more nervous, they tried to form a human chain to slow the crowd. Tragically, when the doors opened, he was trampled to death by the stampede of shoppers. Even officers who arrived to perform CPR on the injured worker were stepped on by shoppers streaming inside. One employee asked "How could you take a man's life to save \$20 on a TV?" And this was all in the name of Christmas shopping! What a powerful contrast between worshiping Christ the Almighty King, and worshiping the Almighty Dollar.

It strikes me that both Jesus and Damour were in their early thirties when they were killed by a mob. However, Jesus willingly gave his life for us. He died for the truth, because he would not fight violence with violence. Damour did not give his life willingly. It was tragically taken from him by an uncontrolled, greedy mob. Until and unless we see this as unacceptable, we will not be living under the reign of Christ the King.

What does it mean to live under this Reign? In America, we have a hard time accepting the term "King" for Christ. We do not like the image of being subject to a King. When we think of King, we may think King George III of England, against whom we fought for freedom in the American Revolution. Or maybe we think of earlier European Kings, like King Henry the eighth of England, or Ferdinand of Spain, or Charles, the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.

But Jesus is different from these earthly Kings. First of all, one of the main goals of the Kings mentioned was to keep their power in the family. They came from royalty, and it was imperative for them to produce heirs to keep their Kingdom going, and to associate with other nobility. Jesus, however, was born not of royalty, but of a lowly woman, a teenage mother. He was not born in a palace, but rather in a stable. Nor did he associate with the nobility. He was welcomed to this world by shepherds, not exactly the movers and shakers of that time and he kept company with fishermen, tax collectors and prostitutes.

Another way Jesus is different is that the Kings wanted to defend and expand their Kingdoms. They used their subjects to fight their battles for them. Jesus, however, rather than battling with arms and ammunition, chooses love as his weapon. Even at the crucial moment, when everything comes to a head in front of Pontius Pilate, he does not do everything in his power to save himself. He does not call his followers to use force to free him. Jesus refuses to fight violence with violence, instead, he offers himself for our salvation. His authority is rooted in truth, not in physical force.

Jesus also does not ask us, his followers, to beat people down in order to defend his Kingdom. Forcing people into a certain belief system or moral conduct defeats the freedom that Christ offers us. Spreading his kingdom is a matter of building people up, not of beating them down. What we are called to defeat is not other people, but rather injustice, war, poverty, and hunger.

Kings forced their people to be obedient to them, and surrounded themselves with servants. Jesus, on the other hand, offers himself as servant to all.

Other Kings were concerned with supporting their own interests by collecting taxes and acquiring worldly possessions. They were not interested in the welfare of their people. Jesus did not use people for gaining possessions. He owned nothing. He cares for his people, he is the shepherd King. He leads us when we are willing to follow. Even when we do not follow and when we stray, we are not forced back into the flock. Jesus comes searching for us, gently calling us to come back. He is a King who cares, the one who knows us, calls us by name. He wants a relationship where he is not above us, but among us.

Reverend Anthony Clavier says of Jesus "Our king likes to go out into the streets in disguise. He turns up as a street person, a homeless, battered woman, a black teen being taunted by young racists, and whispers to us that as we care for everyone, we care for him. As we care for him, we learn what loving sacrifice means. When we are humble enough to learn how to serve, we are ready to acknowledge Christ as king."

We are called to witness to the Kingdom of God daily, to learn to serve and to sacrifice. We are called to bring about this Kingdom by treating those on the margins as

we would treat Christ. We build this Kingdom when we stop using people and loving things, and begin to use things and love people.

Jesus offers a different model of King, and therefore his Kingdom looks different than our earthly Kingdom. His Kingdom is boundless, not limited to a particular racial or national group. All are welcome, especially the poor and neglected in our world.

It is of this rule that Jesus speaks in the Gospel, and asserts that his kingdom "does not belong to this world." He gave Kingship a new meaning. Like him, we are called to live lives of justice and compassion, understanding and generosity. His kingdom is based on these principles.

We do not look at characteristics of historical Kings and Kingdoms as our models. We do not look to Elvis or Michael Jackson as our Kings. But perhaps we can look to a quote by Jimi Hendrix who says "When the power of love replaces the love of power there will be peace in the world."

In this season of Thanksgiving, we celebrate the reign of Christ the King, who rules with the power of love. Jesus both announces and lives the eternal reign of God. He is King who is also Savior, Friend, and Shepherd. His bountiful care is a model for us to follow. May we be truly thankful for all the Christ is for us. In response to that gratitude, may we work to build on earth the Kingdom of peace and justice which Christ proclaimed. Amen.