

Year B Proper 34 The Reign of Christ the King John 18 vv33 to 37

Today marks the end of the Christian year. By this point in November, people are often so busy – already – looking forward to Christmas, the arrival of the baby Jesus (and presents and turkey dinner) that the magnitude of this Sunday gets overshadowed.

This Sunday pulls together the entire Christian year that has come before. It acknowledges where we have ended up after reading the Gospel stories this past year and it points us forward to the new year about to begin. Perhaps it seems like an odd Gospel story for today, out of place... it takes us back to Jesus' trial with Pilate before he was crucified and that was months ago.

But, actually, it does make sense to have this Gospel story here. Next week, we start a new year. A year beginning with a season of joyful hope and expectation. Joyfully expecting a baby? No. We've been there, done that. We are not waiting for a baby. We are waiting for a king...the king that we hear about and worship in our service today.

Sure that king begins life as a baby in Bethlehem...our salvation wrapped up in a cute little bundle of swaddling clothes but just look at this king now. He's been arrested, interrogated and abused by his own people, handed over to the brutal Roman leader to be interrogated and abused some more...he's being disrespected, reviled, scorned, humiliated....

Wait a minute. This doesn't sound like the king we're expecting. This doesn't sound like the Messiah who's going to usher in the fullness of God's kingdom here on earth. What happened to the glorious king, heralded by angels? What happened to the magnificent king at whose name every knee shall bow?

The bloody and ridiculed Jesus on his knees before the mighty Pilate seems a far cry from the glorious Messiah king we're expecting...But is he really?

Think of the alternative. The other king we have in Jesus' story is Herod. Now Herod was the epitome of an earthly king. Herod had shrines and palaces. He had money and power. He was an effective leader – the people all fell in line before the great King Herod.

Eugene Peterson writes:

“So why didn't Jesus learn from Herod? Why didn't Jesus take Herod as his mentor in getting on in the world? In the world into which Jesus was born, no one has done this kingdom thing better. It's true that Herod was not interested in God, but everything else was intact. All Jesus had to do was adopt and then adapt Herod's political style, his skills, his tested principles and put them to work under the rule of God.”

Makes sense right? Well, let's think back to the time when Jesus first began proclaiming his kingdom. He was baptized and then went out into the wilderness and guess who showed up to tempt him. Satan. Satan showed to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in their glorious splendor and said to Jesus, “this can all be yours if you just fall down and worship me.”

Pretty tempting maybe – to someone other than Jesus. But Jesus heard the cost loud and clear...“if you just fall down and worship me.” If you just give in to the ways of the world. If you just keep power and money and social status at the top of the heap. If you just maintain injustice and oppression of those people who aren't like us anyway. Then, you can have all of this – all of these earthly kingdoms.

But Jesus rejects the temptation in one fell swoop – in no uncertain terms, Jesus says, “No”. No – my kingdom is not of this world. Popular thinking would have us believe that this means Jesus’ kingdom – God’s kingdom – is heavenly or spiritual instead of being earthly and physical. But that is absolutely not what Jesus is saying. The world is “*kosmou*” in Greek and it means the decoration, the human-made organizations and institutions and thinking that have been added onto God’s good creation. The “of” in “not of this world”[*ek*] means “from out of, originating from”. So Jesus says to Pilate: My kingdom does not come out of any of the human made beliefs and trappings of power. Human power is all about acquiring and keeping more – more money, more status, more stuff. The “more” of God’s power is love...the perfect love that builds equality, radical welcome, and abundant generosity.

Jesus knows we’re tempted by the ways of the world – money, material stuff, social standing – it’s in our face all the time. Of course we’re tempted and so were the disciples. Jesus spent a lot of his time with the disciples showing them God’s alternative vision of leadership. He said to them:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44)

We’ve spent the past year journeying with Jesus and his disciples...listening to him teach; watching him heal; witnessing him love the unloved. We have learned that in his kingdom no one is hungry, in his kingdom no one is sick, everyone has what they need, everyone is loved unconditionally. We have signed on for that kingdom.

We have given our allegiance to Jesus as king and we remind ourselves of that every time we say, “Jesus Christ the Lord.” To believe that Jesus is Lord of all is to honor and glorify him, above all else, and above all other rulers and authorities.

To accept Jesus as Lord of all is to reject the way of this world. Jesus was born into this world to establish the Kingdom of God, an alternative to the kingdom of Herod. God’s kingdom and Jesus the King embody an upside-down view of power compared to the way of the world. We see it in the exchange with Pilate. Jesus is on his knees yet it is Jesus – the one who seems broken, the one who seems weak, the one who is filled with love not aggression or retaliation – it is Jesus who holds the power. In contrast to what we often, too often witness in the world, Jesus spoke against the love of power and showed us the power of love. He gave his presence, his spirit, his authority, to his disciples and to us, to spread his influence, his teachings, his goodness – in other words, to live in and reveal God’s kingdom – upon this earth until he comes again.

King Herod had built for himself a massive mountain fort called the Herodium. His body was put there when he died. This Herodium is a few miles outside of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, and you can see it all the way from Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives, where Jesus was arrested. It’s an impressive structure. A few people visit it still today but thousands of people flock to the tiny little Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to see where Jesus was born.

So, do we want this bloody and beat up king, the king kneeling in front of Pilate declaring “My kingdom is not of this world.” Is this really what we want? You bet it is.