

Proper 29 B 2018 (Christ the King)
November 25, 2015 :: John 18: 33-37
Fr. Jim Cook

“Not of this World.”

So, here we are, on the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost. It's been a long season, and I, for one, am looking forward to the purple vestments of Advent, and the promise of Christmas.

But we can't get ahead of ourselves. We're still in Pentecost, and we shouldn't forget the fact that this last Sunday in Pentecost has long been described as *Christ the King Sunday*, a day when we are reminded that *Jesus* is our King.

But as someone who was born in this country, and who has lived in a country whose form of government has always been that of a representative democracy, the thought that anyone — I mean, *anyone* — might exercise jurisdiction over me as my *monarch*, sometimes just makes my toes curl. But that is the claim this day makes. So, I'm going to take a few minutes to explore one aspect of what it means to have Jesus as our King, and what it looks like to live in Jesus' kingdom. And to do that, we're going to have to take a closer look at our gospel reading.

At first blush, our gospel reading seems poorly suited for this topic, let-alone this time of year. Because in our gospel reading, we are transported back to a time when Jesus had already been betrayed by Judas, and taken into custody by the Jewish religious authorities. It's hardly the setting for Jesus to be exerting a claim of ultimate leadership. Plus, it's the morning of the day of Jesus' death, and in our gospel reading, Jesus is being interrogated by Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

In all honesty, it took me a long time to realize what was going on in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate. But it's there, in that conversation, that Jesus reveals something unique about his kingdom. And that's what I want to look at.

Now, in that exchange between Jesus and Pilate, Pilate begins by asking Jesus if he is, in fact, the king of the Jews. And Jesus responds to that question thus:

“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” (John 18:36).

Now, I have always interpreted that statement as Jesus asserting his independence — and the independence of his kingdom — from the kingdom of this world. That is, the world of Pilate, and the Jewish religious authorities, do things one way, while the world of Jesus and his followers do things another way.

However, I've been recently persuaded that this is not a great interpretation; that is, it's not a *complete* interpretation. And I came to that understanding when I read what one scholar wrote, which was this:

“What Jesus might be saying . . . is that, were he and his followers of this world, then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: [and that tool is] violence.

But Jesus is not of this world and so Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom by violence. [And] Jesus will make no followers by violence.”

In other words, Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth, and specifically to the truth that God is love (John 3:16). However, because we have not actually seen God, and, because we have such a hard time imagining what God is like (John 1:18), all too often our notions of God, and of God's ways, are dominated by our own experiences of authority figures in this world. For example:

Rather than imagining that God is love, we imagine God to be violent, because we live in a world where authority figures so often hold on to their positions through the use of violence.

Rather than recognizing the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we might assume it's simply the legal mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead, because we have way too much experience with punitive relationships.

And rather than believing that God's grace and acceptance are absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status *but only on the condition* that we fear him,

and obey him, and praise him — *and* despise those who don't — because so much of our life is a *quid pro quo*.

But here's the thing: Jesus is *not* of this world. And that's why his followers will *not* fight for him, to keep him from being "handed over to the Jews." Nor should anyone who follows Jesus ever resort to violence, because to do so violates the very principles that undergird the kingdom of Jesus.

On some days, I'll tend to think this notion of non-violence is slowly catching on. Because according to an article I read a few years ago, people who study such things have determined that death by violence is at an historic low. However, and on other days, *and* because of the 24/7 news channels, it'll *seem* like violence has infected *every* aspect of not only society in general, but also of human interactions in particular. And to me it can *feel* like the world is not an especially safe place.

And so, that's why the world needs the principles of Jesus' kingdom to be the predominant principles for human interaction. Because we still live in a world dominated by the view that the

only answer to violence is more violence. While in our heart-of-hearts, we know that the end-result of that view is death.

But as members of the Church, and as followers of a very different sort of king, we need also to witness to the fact that there are limits to the reach and outcome of force. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., another champion for Christian non-violence, once wrote,

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.

Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.

Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. [And so] it goes.

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

So, where does all this leave us? What I think is our principle option, on this day, and at this particular hour, is to pray. And to bear witness.

To pray that God will comfort those who mourn.

To pray that God will strengthen those who seek to thwart the employers of violence, and bring them to justice.

To pray that God will change the hearts of those who can see no other way forward but through violence.

And to pray that God will equip all of us to work for a peace born of equity, for only such a peace can last.

And then, after our praying, we are called to bear witness:

To bear witness to the One who demonstrated power through weakness,

who manifested strength through vulnerability,

who established justice through mercy,

and who built the kingdom of God — the kingdom where Jesus is our monarch — by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world; taking its pain into his own body; dying the death that it sought; and rising again, to remind us that light is stronger than darkness, that love is stronger than hate, and that with God, all good things are possible.

And, in the end, to give thanks to God for the witness, and the example, and the message of the life and death of Jesus; because it *feels* like the world has never needed it more. And to give thanks to God, for all who proclaim the radical gospel of Christ, and who bear witness to the way of a King who is so different than the world's kings. And to acknowledge the One who not only testifies to the truth of love, but who also calls us to do the same.

Amen.