

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2018  
The Reign of Christ - Year B

2 Samuel 23:1-7  
Psalm 93  
Revelation 1:4b-8  
John 18:33-37

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

We have many images for Christ, and some people will find that one particular image is helpful while others may not. It strikes me that a number of our images for Christ are passive, even weak images; Christ as the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd, the Way, the Truth, the Gate; the list goes on. Today's feast is really the only time when we celebrate the kingship of Christ - but do we really? What is this kingship actually all about?

Perhaps the most confusing part of this feast for us is the tension that exists, as we celebrate this feast. Because on the one hand we are proclaiming the message: "Soon, and very soon, we are going to see the king." And on the other hand But not quite yet.

That is the theological tension we experience each year on Christ the King Sunday. Liturgically speaking, it is the end of the year -- a feast day which culminates all those ordinary Sundays following Pentecost. Practically speaking, though, it is also somewhat of an Advent prelude -- an opportunity to remember that the promise of Christmas is much more than the birth of a baby. Our king is coming -- and we had better get ready.

Still, tensions remain. If Jesus is king, then what sort of king is he? Moreover, given the painful brutalities spread across the world in recent times, exactly what can we expect from this king? Perhaps, like Pilate, we're not quite sure what to make when Jesus says, "I'm just not that type of king."

As Jesus tells Pilate during their interaction, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate is confused, and so are we -- especially as we try to make sense of the terror we have witnessed, and the attempts others make at creating their own sorts of kingdoms. Jesus comes testifying to the truth, declaring, as John says in Revelation, that he is “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

He comes speaking the truth: soon, and very soon, we are going to see the king. The shape and contour of that kingdom, however, may catch us off-guard. Because, as Jesus says, “My Kingdom is not of this world.

What exactly does Jesus mean by this comment? Is he asserting his independence, that this world and its powers ultimately cannot determine his fate, perhaps reminiscent of his words in John 10: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”. Perhaps Jesus is essentially saying that if this conflict were happening in his kingdom, then indeed his followers would fight, but since it was happening in this other kingdom, a kingdom that cannot keep hold of him, his followers do not get involved.

Perhaps. But there is another option. And this option is predicated upon the fact that as human beings we are limited in our understanding of things, other than to lean on the experiences we have. Or to put it another way, if we only ever experience things in one way, we struggle to understand the alternative.

In light of this, then, 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: *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. Jesus will make no followers by violence.

Rather, Jesus has come to witness to the truth, the truth that God is love.

But because we have not seen God and have such a hard time imagining God, all too often our imaginations are dominated by our experience. So rather than imagining that God is love, we imagine God to be like us because we live in a world of violence.

Rather than recognize the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we assume it's the legal mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead because we have way too much experience with punitive relationships. Rather than believe that God's grace and acceptance are absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status only on the condition that we fear, obey, and praise God - because so much of our life is quid pro quo.

But Jesus is not of this world. And therefore his followers will not fight for him because to bring the kingdom about by violence is to violate the very principles of this kingdom and cause its destruction.

We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. And the end result of that view is death.

Does that mean Jesus is calling us to be pacifists? Some traditions - particularly Mennonite, Quaker, and Church of the Brethren believers - have given vivid testimony to the power of Christian non-violence. These courageous and counter-cultural witnesses have at times shaken the powers that be and cannot and should not be quickly discarded. There is, equally, an understanding that has stressed that temporal authorities like armies and law enforcement have a critical role to play in creating a more orderly and more just world. Standing in this tradition, some believe that terrorists everywhere should be opposed vigorously, fought tirelessly, and brought to justice whenever possible so that there is less such violence in the world.

But as members of the Church and followers of a very different kind of king, we need also to witness that there are limits to the reach and outcome of force. As Martin Luther King, Jr., another champion for Christian non-violence, 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. 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 that leave us? Well it might just leave us feeling helpless. And, actually that's OK. Because we might well feel that there is nothing we can do anyway - that in fact all we can do is that we gather this day to pray and to witness. To pray that God will comfort those who mourn, strengthen those who seek to thwart terrorists and bring them to justice, change the hearts of those who can see no other way forward but through violence, and equip all of us to work for a peace born of equity, for only such a peace will last.

And after our praying, we are then called to witness: to 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 by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world, taking its pain into his own body, dying the death it sought, and rising again to remind us that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hate, and that with God, all good things are possible.

Thanks be to God for this message, as the world has never needed it more. And thanks be to all who proclaim the radical gospel of Christ, the King so different than the world's kings and the One who testifies to the truth and calls us to do the same.

In the name of God. Amen