

“Welcome the King”

John 18: 33-37

Christ the King Sunday

November 25, 2012

CCUMC

Melanie Dobson Hughes

Introduction

Today is the feast of Christ the King, the final Sunday of the church’s liturgical year. Next week we start a new church year with the first Sunday in Advent. All of today’s scripture passages focus on kingships—those of David, God, and Jesus.¹

For Christ the King to actually have its own Sunday is a calendar anomaly; since Thanksgiving came the earliest it could this year, we have this one extra Sunday before the rush of Christmas pours over us. Usually Christ the King gets swept under the stewardship campaign and the marking of gratitude for Thanksgiving.

This year we have a rare opportunity to hear what God might teach us about Christ as king, about what it means to live in a realm different than the rest of the politics around us. Our scripture for the gospel for Christ the King comes this year from the gospel of John, with Jesus before Pontius Pilate. Pilate has just gone to the Jews to ask them about accusations against Jesus. He has tried to “pass the buck” to them to handle this troublemaker, but the Jews passed Jesus back off on Pilate—saying they didn’t have legal jurisdiction. Pilate troops back into his headquarters, and with a deep sigh, calls for Jesus. This is where our text for today begins.

John 18: 33- 38

I. Elections= No truth

In the spirit of our recently celebrated Thanksgiving, many of us offer thanks that the election year finally came to an end. We became so weary and frustrated with the

¹ Stephen Fowl, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century* (November 14, 2012), 21.

inundation of advertising by candidates in part because so much of it was half-truths, or no truth at all. A whole industry of fact-checkers were kept busy this year after each debate, and reporting on falsehoods in candidate's claims. The truly egregious amount of money spent by super-PACs and political parties on the elections made candidates speak in partial truths in order to gain or retain power. The kingdom and the powers in the United States government and its elections orient much more to easy falsehoods than to difficult truth.

II. A Tale of Two Kingdoms—of terror and truth

I get the sense that Pontius Pilate in our text for today was jaded by his government of falsehood; lack of transparency in government has been going on for a long time. Pilate had been struggling to climb his way up the ladder of success in the Roman government. He most likely was disgruntled with his appointment as a prelate to such a backwater place in the Roman Empire as Jerusalem. However, the Roman government's methods of power were all he knew; he had been trained in them as a little boy. Falsehoods and jockeying for power and control were just the accepted methods of the kingdom. Pilate abides by the rules of the kingdom because they are the truth he knows

Yet, here he is confronted with this Jesus character. This Jesus guy is stirring things up for Pilate, creating a conflict he must handle—extra work he really doesn't want to do. He tries to ask the Jews, Jesus' own people, about the crime he's done, but the crowd hands Jesus right back to Pilate. "Great," Pilate thinks, "I've got a troublemaker on my hands consuming my time and whose own people won't even deal with him." So Pilate has Jesus brought to him for an interview. He asks Jesus plainly if he is planning an insurrection, a rebellion—if Jesus somehow thinks of himself as a king of a ragtag group of revolutionaries. Jesus starts spouting off all this stuff about his kingdom not being from here, not from this

world. This sounds nonsensical to Pilate; whatever kingdom Jesus is babbling about doesn't sound like the kingdom he knows as true.

Two radically different kingdoms are represented in this text. It's worth stopping Pilate's interview of Jesus at this point to clearly elucidate these different worlds.

Power

The first difference in the two kingdoms is in regard to power. The kingdom of Pilate, Rome, conceives of power as something for selfish ends. No larger concern for the community exists. Pilate, as a governor in this system, is to protect his power and lord it over people, even to the point of using the death penalty—which is what the Jewish people wanted him to do with Jesus.

The kingdom of Jesus is often called a 'kindom' in order to differentiate it from the traditionally male, hierarchical, and domineering forms of power associated with the word 'kingdom.' A kindom stresses the significance of relationships, of self-giving to others. In a kindom, Jesus doesn't grasp desperately onto power, but instead pours himself out—giving life in order to bring life. Jesus empowers others and offers a vision of leadership as that of being a servant, as one who kneels down and washes the feet of others.²

Followers

The second difference between the two kingdoms comes with the different behavior of the followers. Adherents to Pilate's kingdom of Rome use violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nationality. These followers use tactics of terror to bring control.

By contrast the followers of Jesus put away weapons and tactics of terror, and aren't interested in controlling people. Rather, Jesus' disciples try to invite and unify people. They

² Jaime Clark Soles, "Lectionary John 18:33-37" workingpreacher.org Accessed November 19, 2012. I'm indebted to Soles for the comparisons between the two kingdoms.

offer free meals of loaves and fish, they give healing to those in desperate illness, they provide a loving community to those who are lonely. The disciples, as does Jesus, draw people to them, not to control them, but to teach them more about the love of God.

Source of Authority

The third main difference between Pilate's kingdom and Jesus' kingdom is the source of their authority. For Pilate, authority comes from the Caesar in Rome. Whoever is in power at any given time dictates who does what, when. In such a system, people dwell with constant uncertainty and insecurity, at the whims of a human leader endowed with more power than any one person should ever have.

Jesus' power, however, stems from the God of Abraham, the prophets, and the people of Israel. This God's authority reveals itself in steadfast love, faithfulness, and constancy. Such authority is far more reliable and trustworthy than fickle human power. Under God's authority, people dwell secure—knowing they are always held in the arms of a loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

III. Trying for Truth

Now back to Pilate, interviewing Jesus in his headquarters. Pilate listens intently to Jesus' description of a kingdom far different than the one he knows. He perceives that this is a kingdom with a completely other source of power, kind of follower, and person of authority than the kingdom of Rome. Pilate hears Jesus dodging his question about being a king, and instead saying, "I came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate pauses a moment. His whole conception of reality is being called into question. Pilate well knows he is fed propaganda from Rome; political advertising replete with falsehoods is as old as human civilization. Rome's own version of super-PACs have filled

the airways of the mind his whole life, telling him that this is the best culture the world has ever known, the best government, the best city. . . so it must be true, right? But Pilate isn't so sure anymore. This Jesus character, whom he really didn't want to have to deal with, is offering him a completely different story. Is this guy a complete threat to the Rome Pilate is charged with protecting? Or is this guy offering a life and a kingdom unlike Pilate has ever known? Pilate isn't sure. He wavers.

He decides to ask a question. Part of him, a part he can't even admit to owning, yearns for the kingdom Jesus is offering. Most of him, though, is trained to uphold the truth of the Roman empire—even if he knows some of it is built upon political half-truths. He asks, wavering between two kingdoms, “What is truth?”

We don't get an answer from Jesus here. There is silence. Pilate returns to the Jewish leaders to say he can't find any charges against Jesus. Somehow, in the silence in our text, Jesus convinced Pilate that he wasn't guilty of sedition, that he wasn't trying to build a violent insurrection against Rome.

While we don't know how Jesus answered, we do know that elsewhere in the gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, the life.” (John 14:6) Jesus, in his incarnation, is truth. He is the real deal. This isn't an exclusionary statement, rather Jesus is trying to beckon all the world to come live as brothers and sisters in his kingdom, in a place where no one goes hungry, the sick are tended to, the lonely find a family. Jesus must have shown to Pilate a truth so real, so honest, so free from any hint of falsehood, that Pilate could only turn on his heel and protest to Jewish leaders that he couldn't arrest Jesus.

However, we know the end of the story. Pilate eventually wavers: he knows he's encountered a truth he's never experienced before. Yet, he's too well formed in the

kingdom of this world, to do what is politically expedient. He caves, he takes the easy road, and denies the biggest truth the world has ever seen.³

Truth in Us

Now, here we are two days after Black Friday, which has actually now become Black Thursday. We should know well what it is like to be Pilate, to be formed and shaped completely by another kingdom with immense power over our lives. This kingdom tells complete falsehoods. I mean here not the government of the United States, though that, as I mentioned before, has its share of half-truths. No, in this inaugural week of the Christmas shopping season I mean commercialism. Our “shop till you drop” culture tells us to spend money to be happy, that stuff and things can make us or the people we love happy—and the more expensive the stuff the better the chance of happiness. Billions of dollars of advertising from the kingdom of consumption convince us that we must buy and spend in order to have any chance at a good life. So indoctrinated from this powerful kingdom we slog through shopping malls or online to buy gifts that generally won’t be remembered in three months.⁴ So indoctrinated are we now that we can’t even pause for one day to be grateful for what we have, without being pressured to buy more before the turkey is even in the refrigerator.

Must Pilate’s fate be ours? Jesus says in today’s text, “everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice.” Pilate ultimately chose to stay with the kingdom he knew. Can we have the courage to join up with Jesus’ kingdom? Can we live into an alternative view of power, what it means to follow, and who has authority? **Power** Can we hear that the power of purchasing is sawdust in comparison to the power of a leader who kneels to wash our feet?

Followers Can we hear the truth that we are to be followers who live in love, not in the

³ David Lose, “Lectionary: November 25, 2012” workingpreacher.org.

⁴ Ibid.

terror of never having enough, never being enough in the kingdom of consumerism?

Authority Can we resist the authority that convinces us to buy happiness, and instead welcome into our hearts the authority of One who tells us, you are freely loved, you are enough? Can we welcome the truth of Jesus as the kingdom in which we want to dwell? Can we hear his voice? On this Christ the King Sunday, may God grant us the ability to not waver, to not be a Pilate. May we accept the truth of Jesus in our lives, and live as ones who belong to a kingdom of God. Amen