

"A Kingdom Not from this World"
Sermon for Christ the King Sunday
Lectionary Year B
November 22, 2009
Text: John 18:33-37
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One of the more interesting features of the *Gospel of John* is that it includes several conversations between Jesus and various individuals that don't appear in the other *Gospels*. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is one such conversation; the discussion Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at the well is another. And we have for this morning an additional conversation not included in the other *Gospels*, that between Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

After his arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was taken to Pilate, the Roman governor, because the Jewish religious leaders wanted Jesus killed by crucifixion, and they did not have the authority to condemn someone to death in this manner. Only Rome could do that. When Christ was brought to Pilate, the charge against him was changed from blasphemy to insurrection, based on the feeling that Rome would be much more likely to execute him for being a revolutionary who was trying to lead an armed revolt against the occupying government.

This is how Jesus came to have this conversation with Pilate. In the course of it, Christ says to the Roman governor, "My kingdom is not

from this world . . . my kingdom is not from here." This conversation between these two individuals represents, then, the dramatic clashing of two kingdoms, two worlds, two spheres of authority and influence. One is from God, and one is from this world. And they are like night and day, oil and water, AM and FM. They don't go together. They are on opposite ends of the spectrum. They not only are incompatible, they are diametrically opposed to one another. And if we look closely at this conversation, we see how Jesus' kingdom, the kingdom of God, is truly not from this world.

Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, because it is the kingdom of individual responsibility. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and Jesus answers, in essence, "Is that your question or someone else's?" This response by Jesus should remind us of a similar conversation Jesus had with his disciples. Initially he inquired of them, "Who are other people saying I am?" but then he went on to ask his followers, "But who do *you* say I am?"

The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which each individual has to take responsibility for his or her thoughts, words, and deeds. It's not a kingdom from this world, because if we are honest enough to admit it, we avoid individual responsibility as much as possible in our culture today. If we are caught doing something we shouldn't, we faithfully follow the three Ds: we first try to *deny* that we even did it. If that

doesn't work we attempt to *deflect* the blame elsewhere, and if that fails as well we make every effort to *diminish* the seriousness of the offense by stating something like, "It's not really that big a deal." That's the kingdom from this world's strategy.

And we are experts when it comes to playing the blame game. There is an old joke that could apply to anyone's profession, but I am going to use the example of a minister who comes to a new church. As he is setting up his office, he opens the bottom drawer of his desk and finds three envelopes addressed to him. Out of curiosity, he opens the first letter. It says: "When things begin to go badly for you, blame the seminary." He throws the letter away, but as it turns out, it doesn't take very long for the honeymoon to be over, and people in the church begin to grumble about one thing and then another, questioning the pastor's capability. Remembering the letter, he responds to his critics by saying, "I'm sorry, but seminary simply did not equip me to deal with this issue."

That seemed to satisfy his fomenting flock for a time, but eventually negative comments about him surfaced again. He went back to the bottom drawer of his desk and extracted the second letter. It read, "now blame the Annual Conference." So as assaults against him arose afresh and anew, he responded with, "I'm sorry, but I simply am carrying out the wishes of my Bishop and District Superintendent."

That kept the dogs at bay for awhile once again, but inevitably the turmoil resurfaced, and in a desperate attempt once again to ward off his attackers, he drew from the well of his bottom drawer and the third letter. It simply stated, "Write three letters."

It is ever so tempting to give excuses and lay blame elsewhere, no matter what the setting is or circumstances are. But the kingdom of God, the kingdom Jesus is pointing to, is a kingdom of individual responsibility, in which we admit that we are responsible for what we think, say, or do. Jesus responds to Pilate, "Do you ask this on your own, . . . ? *On your own*, that's how you are to act in terms of taking responsibility in the kingdom that is from God.

There is another way apparent in this passage that the kingdom from God is not from this world. **The kingdom from God is a kingdom of non-violence.** Jesus, who has been brought before Pilate for supposedly being a revolutionary, says to the Roman governor, "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."

The kingdom of God is a kingdom where things are not decided by force. It is not a kingdom of control, of domination, of oppression, of coercion, of manipulation, or of retaliation. It is a kingdom of peace.

Our salvation has been won by the Messiah who dies, not by the Messiah who kills.

We live in a violent country, in a culture attracted to and almost addicted to violence. The movies we often prefer to watch are but one example of this fact. I learned some things recently from an enlightening documentary entitled *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, about the rating system we use in this country for our movies. It seems that while the American Motion Picture Association will slap an NC-17 rating, the most restricted rating possible, rather quickly on a film with sexual content considered outside the norm, there seems to be no limit on the amount or the graphic nature of the violence in a movie that would cause the ratings board to give the film more than an R rating. What is interesting is that in Europe, the exact opposite is true. Their ratings board is a lot stricter about violence than about sex in films shown there.

In case you haven't thought about it in just this way before, I want you to consider Jesus' death in this regard. He was tortured and then killed in the most violent way possible in his day by the most powerful empire the world has ever known. And God raised him from the dead as a dramatic statement of the fact that both violence and imperialism represent the things of this world in direct opposition and completely counter to the things of God. When will we learn that

power is not strength or might or force? *True power is the ability to accomplish purpose, which may look more like weakness from the perspective of this world.* But the Apostle Paul states firmly that the best place to look for a demonstration of the power of God is the cross of Christ.

The kingdom of Jesus, God's kingdom, is not from this world, because it is a kingdom of individual responsibility and a kingdom of non-violence. **It also is not a kingdom from here, because it is a kingdom of truth.** Jesus says to Pilate, "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." The kingdom of God is a kingdom of truth.

And that is yet another reason why it can't be a kingdom from this world. The lectionary reading for today omits Pilate's final response to Jesus in this conversation. Pilate asks Christ, "What is truth?" We can relate to that question, can't we? What is truth? Who or what can we believe? Where can we go to find what is true?

We know we can't rely on the government to tell us the truth. We've been lied to over and over again, to the point that we no longer can accept much of anything at face value that comes out of Washington. Wall Street certainly has not been overly truthful in recent years. We know we have to evaluate carefully what we hear

from talk radio or cable news. What is said may be a half-truth at best. And ever since the quiz show scandals fifty years ago, we understand full well that what is presented as reality on television may be completely staged. It's no wonder we are a nation of cynics and doubting Thomases.

But as is true for individual responsibility and non-violence, *truth begins with us*. It begins with us as Christians within the community of faith we call the church. Do we speak the truth to one another in love? As followers of Jesus, are we honest at work, at home, at school, at play? Does our word count for something? Do we mean what we say? Is there integrity in our speech? Are our relationships such that we can trust each other enough to share openly and honestly our thoughts and our feelings? Do we demand the truth of ourselves and those with whom we are intimate?

The kingdom from God is a kingdom of truth. And those who are committed to the truth are willing to listen and heed the teachings of Jesus. The problem is that I'm not so sure we can handle the truth, because if we take Jesus' teachings seriously, if we relate to his words as ultimate truth and allow our lives to be guided by them, we are going to find ourselves in opposition to the world and its perspective on things. The kingdom from here is not from God.

Theologians like Hans Küng help us to see that while the church is not to be equated with the kingdom of God, it is our task in the church to be the witnesses for and the proclaimers of that kingdom [*The Church*, p. 135]. We are to point people in the direction of God's kingdom, and if we listen closely to this conversation between Jesus and Pilate, we can overhear what we can do individually and as a congregation to demonstrate to others what God's kingdom is like. As we take individual responsibility for our lives, as we model non-violent behavior, and as we are committed to truth, we help to bring hope to our world of a coming kingdom that is not from here, but from God.