

CHRIST IS KING
John 18:28-38
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 24, 2013

Today is both Christ the King Sunday and the last Sunday of the Church year. Next week the new year begins on the First Sunday in Advent, Advent being the season of preparation before Christmas.

The Gospel reading for this last Sunday of the year reports Jesus' trial before Pilate on the last day of his life.

On Good Friday, early that morning Jesus was hauled before the Sanhedrin's secretly convened Kangaroo Court. Perjured witnesses made accusations against Jesus but the tide really turned when Jesus was questioned about his teachings. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world...I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them. They know what I said."

Immediately Jesus' face was slapped for being so disrespectful to the High Priest and from there Jesus was handed over to Pilate who shrewdly sensed he was being made the High Priest's cat's paw. Not wanting to be embroiled in any local sectarian squabbles Pilate tried detaching himself from the controversy. But the temple priests quickly checkmated him. "If this man were not a criminal we would not have handed him over to you."

Outmaneuvered, Pilate reluctantly took Jesus into his house and there asked him straight out, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Ironic isn't it? We call Jesus "King," but Jesus himself never claimed to be one. In fact, when Jesus learned he was about to be taken by force and proclaimed Israel's new king, after feeding the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish, he fled to the mountains. Even so, on Good Friday Jesus was falsely accused of seeking power.

Sometimes all the makings of the perfect storm converge causing kings to lose their thrones and even their heads. Louis XVI comes to mind. One day he's an absolute monarch, the next, a prisoner being jeered at by the crowds at his execution.

Unlike earthly kings executed for abusing power, Jesus never did. In fact the case can be made Jesus was rejected because he wouldn't be an earthly king who pandered to the people's pipedream of Jerusalem replacing Rome as the capital of the world. Nor would Jesus ever expect his people to die protecting his life. He made this very point when he said to Pilate, "If my Kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here."

Isn't that what earthly kings expect? Soldiers die fighting in their kings' wars. Food tasters die if their king's food was poisoned. As amazing as it sounds, even today, somewhere in the Middle East there's a well paid, loyal subject whose only job is to stand by and, if necessary, become his king's organ donor.

But instead of us dying to save him, Jesus died to save us. Think about that, your king died for you. And by dying for the sins of the world Jesus reaffirmed the power of his Kingdom not of this world.

Which brings us back to Pilate's dilemma. Oddly enough, Pilate, not Jesus, was really the one on trial. Pilate, not Jesus, was the one squirming even though he was the one asking the questions. Jesus, on the other hand, because he submitted to his Father's will the night before in Gethsemane praying, "...never the less not my will, but your will be done," regally commanded the situation.

With crossed fingers Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" hoping Jesus would put an end to it by answering, "No, of course not. Now will you please let me go home?" But Jesus wouldn't let Pilate off the hook. "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus let Pilate know he knew Pilate knew Jesus was being framed. Unfortunately for him, Pilate's political instincts automatically kicked in; instead of answering honestly, man to man, he dodged the question. "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own priests handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered Pilate's dodge with a straight answer. "My Kingdom is not from this world." Pilate shot back, "So, you are a King?" Pilate was again afraid he would hear what he didn't want to hear, Jesus proclaiming himself in open rebellion against Rome. Instead Jesus continued to frustrate Pilate. "You say I am a king. 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. Pilate then famously asked Jesus, "What is truth?"

You have to wonder what was Pilate's tone of voice when he asked, "What is truth?" Did he say it with a cynical ring or genuine longing? Sadly, either way, Pilate didn't wait for an answer, instead being the consummate politician he immediately rushed out to negotiate with the crowds, hoping they'd be more cooperative.

"What is truth?" If Pilate didn't blind himself with his complex insecurities and agendas he'd have realized he was staring at the personification of truth all along.

Interesting point: the Greek word John used for truth translates into the English word reality. Earlier in John's Gospel Jesus claimed, "I am the Truth." Translation: "I am Reality." Another way of putting it, "I am Real."

Jesus presented Pilate with a moment of truth and he passed on it. Pilate couldn't/wouldn't face reality; he rejected it because he was caught up in trying to protect himself from the very Truth that could have set him, free.

Like Pilate, we're invited to face the Truth. Pilate couldn't admit the might of Rome, even his own personal power were based on a false premise and therefore an illusion. But he was afraid to even question his illusions because that would mean giving up the position, power and security he craved.

As a result, Pilate, used to getting what he wanted, was completely out of control and the more he tried to grab it back the more delusional and desperate he became.

On this last Sunday before Advent, we remind ourselves and each other Christ is our King who rules the world with truth and grace. And Christ isn't just the King of the Jews, and Lord of the Christians. He reigns over a Kingdom without borders that permeates the universe and beyond. He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Alpha and Omega, and his Kingdom will never end.

Pilate and all the world's movers and shakers despite their intelligence, political skills and will to power, unlike Jesus, won't comprehend that real power comes from being reconciled and healed through God's unconditional love. Real power manifests itself not by empowering yourself at the expense of others but through empowering others at the expense of yourself. The truly powerful people in the world don't grab the center of attention for themselves, but realize Christ is already front and center, then Kingdom's deepest secrets are unleashed and God's power revealed. His Truth sets us free to love and be loved, to serve and be served and following his example, become committed to the Kingdom lifestyle.

After Pilate had Jesus flogged, he presented him to the crowds proclaiming, "Ecco, homo!", "Behold the man." Pilate hoped Jesus' bloodied, tortured body would evoke sympathy and the crowd's blood lust would abate. Instead God's own people after hoping and waiting for their promised King for almost seven hundred years roundly condemned him to death.

From our vantage point, the absurdity of Good Friday is self-evident, until we find ourselves threatened like the High Priests or cornered like Pilate. Then we become the aggressive ones fighting for our place at the table. But when we come to our senses and realize there's room for everyone and we give up our seat so another can be fed that's when we experience the power of the Kingdom not of this world.

Especially on Christ the King Sunday we are being asked to contrast the way of being and doing in the world with the way of being and doing in Christ's Kingdom. Pilate and the High Priests become the poster boys for the warning "Don't let this happen to you!" When the Truth stares you in the face, don't avert your eyes, look at him no matter how hard or uncomfortable it gets until the Truth pricks your conscience then challenges you to change your thinking and finally your ways.

What would have happened if Pilate let the Truth set him free? Probably he'd have lost his power, wealth and security, but embracing the Truth he would have gained his freedom.

Next Sunday we begin to prepare for our King's birth. May our Advent journeys bring us closer to God and our neighbors as well as ourselves. That's the more excellent way to love and serve Christ the King.