

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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What Kind of Kingdom? John 18:33-37

This week is the last Sunday of the current liturgical year, next week we commence Advent, in anticipation of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. These days we are accustomed of talking about “year-end analysis” in which we take stock in our work, our educational pursuits, and our personal finances. The lectionary focuses our readings and our thoughts upon “Christ the King”, a vision of Jesus that many have problems accepting. Let’s take time to reflect upon the verses from 2 Samuel 23:1-7.

³ *The God of Israel spoke,
the Rock of Israel said to me:
'When one rules over men in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,*

⁴ *he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings the grass from the earth.'*

These verses hold our attention by the metaphors that translate “from darkness to light (v. 4a)” and from senescence or death to life (v. 4b). We can find great comfort and hope in these words of the Lord, even on a cloudy, rainy morning.

Psalm 93 moves our concept of the power of the Lord with an almost militaristic character (v. 1):

¹ *The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed in majesty
and is armed with strength.*

*The world is firmly established;
it cannot be moved.*

⁴ *Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the LORD on high is mighty.*

⁵ *Your statutes stand firm;
holiness adorns your house
for endless days, O LORD.* Yet, in this verse 5 we find a “softening” of the image of the Lord’s power.

Our New Testament reading from John (18:33-37) likewise is on a path towards the concept of “Jesus-the-King”, and also the nature of the Kingdom of the Lord. John 18:33-37 relates a powerful dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate the Roman Prefect of the province of Judea. The dialogue is terse, occurs during the Passion of Christ, and is informs our hearts and souls about the nature of Jesus and the Kingdom of the Lord.

³³ *Pilate then went back inside the palace,
summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the
king of the Jews?"*

³⁴ *"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did
others talk to you about me?"*

³⁵ *"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your
people and your chief priests who handed you
over to me. What is it you have done?"*

³⁶ *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If
it were, my servants would fight to prevent my
arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from
another place."*

³⁷"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

When we encounter these passages in the Scripture, we might ask ourselves the following. If we were "Jesus Followers" in first century Palestine, what would we have thought to be the Kingdom of the Lord?, to be the nature of Jesus?, and to be the nature of this man who refers to himself in Revelation as "I am the alpha and omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end". This is pretty heady talk, even from a charismatic self-proclaimed prophet in first century Palestine.

Pilate's comments are quite remarkable, since we begin to sense that Pilate recognizes that this is not some simple, dusty prophet. This Jesus in known to carry on with the likes of sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and the unclean (i.e., the lepers and sick). The dialogue not only concerns the nature of this person handed over to Pilate by the Jews and Chief Priests, but often sounds like a test of the "ideals of power" as understood by a Roman Prefect with unfettered power derived from the Roman Empire.

What kind of kingdom did Jesus describe then? What would Jesus Followers have expected to be the Kingdom then in first century Palestine? More importantly, what kind of kingdom do we too expect today as Christians? If someone were to ask any of us, "tell me in more detail about this Kingdom of the Lord?" we would be hard pressed to provide good solid details. The facts are that today, much like in the time of the apostles, followers of Jesus often find themselves confronted with both illusions and limitations when they try to think of Jesus Christ-the-King and the very nature of the Kingdom of the Lord.

In spite of the power of the words of Jesus the prophet, us humans thinking about Jesus as "Christ-the-King" can be an effort filled with false expectations and thereby disappointment. Let us go back to the verses in John 18 and listen to the words of our Lord,

³⁶Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

There is no fortress and palace, no standing and mighty army, no guards and no wealth, no social status in this prophet from Nazareth. Pilate thinks like a Roman, in Roman Empire ways. Pilate senses something to be reckoned with in this man called Jesus, also referred to as the "*Son of Man*" and "*Son of God*" [Matt 14:33; Mark 3:11; Luke 22:70...*They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am."*]. In his heart, Pilate (like Pilate's wife) senses, I suspect, the divinity of Jesus. Pilate was trying to "fit" the man called Jesus of Nazareth into the trappings of the Roman empire-filled world of first century Palestine. It did not work for Pilate, does it work for us?

Perhaps we are a bit like Pontius Pilate ourselves, trying to "fit" Jesus Christ into the trappings of the world of 21st century humankind? Do we try to "fit" the message of Jesus Christ and His knowledge of the Kingdom of the Lord into our own world, into our own kingdoms, and into our own times? Let us all ask ourselves, "When do we seek this kingdom of which Jesus speaks? When do we seek this Kingdom? and, what constitutes the Kingdom of the Lord in our world today?"

Let me start off with my own experiences, see if they sound familiar to you. When I am happy, when my heart is filled with wonder and gladness, I praise the Lord and sense the omnipresence of the Kingdom of God. When I think of our congregation witnessing the incarnation of God in the world through His Son, Jesus Christ, I can literally feel the new being that the Apostle Paul tells us we become when we enter in the body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*). How about each of you, think about when you best understand in your hearts being in the body of Christ and part of the Kingdom of the Lord? We find too few words often to express our devotional thanks to the Lord, especially when life has met our needs with abundance.

But what about the other aspects of life, when we are confronted by impossible challenges: such as sickness, isolation, depression, economic desperation, and even death, where is the Kingdom of the Lord, its security, comfort, love, and acceptance? How often do we beseech God and in lamentation call out, where are you in my life, Lord? Based upon our own experiences, can we tell to where the Kingdom extends in our lives and most certainly where it does not extend? Let try a few possible scenarios:

A new loved-filled relationship *versus* an unplanned estrangement from ones that we love;

A graduation achieved as we move forward in our lives *versus* a failed semester or year in our education;

A good health or return to good health *versus* a dire sickness, physical and/or emotional with a dire prognosis;

A new job, secured after so much hard work *versus* a good, “secure” job lost in a tough unpredictable economy;

A birth, a new healthy life *versus* an early unpredicted or prolonged suffering death.

Here we begin to set our boundaries from “the blessings of heaven here on Earth” versus “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me*” [Matt 27:46]. Where are we to draw the boundaries on the “Kingdom”?

If we reflect upon these and other verses from John, we can discern major boundaries:

[[John 3:16](#)] *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

[John 20:30-31] ³⁰*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

The Gospels tell us of the “in-breaking” of God into our world in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, by and through the love of God for humankind. Christ was sent to dwell among us, a Living God who speaks to us today and each day, afresh, to those whose ears can hear. Christ entered this world to establish for us earthly creatures a new set of “boundaries”, ones without limit. Through the message of love of God, love of oneself, and love of thy neighbor, Jesus Christ defines these boundaries without limit. Jesus submitted voluntarily to death for us, to death on a cross to fulfill the Scriptures overcoming our sins with forgiveness and breaking through the greatest boundary of earthly kingdoms, that of death. In the body of Christ we Christians find fulfillment of the Scriptures and confess our faith in the salvation and life everlasting in the Living, God-of-the-Cross. Thus, the “in-breaking” of God defines for us not just a new kingdom, but also one with no boundaries, no limitations, made accessible to us through the love of Jesus Christ.

So what do we recognize in the Kingdom of the Lord? The answer, there exists no boundaries of time or space, no palace, no Taj Mahal, no earthly temple reaching to the heavens with gilded dome, but the body of the everlasting and everliving God, Jesus Christ. What we witness is the “in-breaking of God” into not only 1st century Palestine, but rather an “in-breaking of God” into the world in the incarnation; this “in-breaking of God” is once-and-for-all time as well as once-and-for-all of us earthly creatures. We witness an “in-breaking of God” not just when our hearts are filled with gladness and our prayers are answered, but also an “in-breaking of God” in the times of impossible challenges and prayers seemingly unanswered. We witness this “in-breaking of God” in the extremes of our lives, the triumphs and the traumas, the restorations and the losses, and the blessings and the seemingly unblessed.

But is there an “in-breaking of God” into the everyday dimensions of our everyday lives? Here we are not speaking about the extremes, positive and negative that we use to frame our lives. Rather, I am speaking about letting ourselves explore the Kingdom of the Lord in those more average swings in life. When we worship and

pray to the Lord, we communicate with God, with ourselves, and do so in the context of our lives and our community. The source of our strength has headwaters in our relationship with God, our love of self as we come to embrace the new being in Christ, and in being within a community of the faithful. We are a joyful community who confess their belief in the centrality of the “inbreaking” of God into all aspects of our lives through Jesus Christ.

What Jesus answers to Pilate answers the primary question about the authority of Jesus and does so in ways that Pilate can only understand viscerally in his heart, not in his head. The promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ is the new way, a way that elevated the numbers of the apostles from 12 early in the first century to 2.2 billion Christians in the 21st century. We as Christians confess our faith in God through Christ in the extremes of our lives, now we must work more on the everyday swings of life. In turning our hearts to Jesus Christ, in the new being of *Corpus Christi* we can begin to answer our leading query in terms of our entire life. What Kind of Kingdom is it? Our Christian beliefs tell us that we, in coming to faith in the body of Christ, define for ourselves the dimensions of the Kingdom of God. For it is in this life-long, but everyday journey that we understand the Kingdom as well as Christ-the-King is a personal, spiritual and sustainable manner. We are the Kingdom of God and define its boundaries every day through our faith. As the body of Christ, we access the boundless dimensions of God’s love and forgiveness for us through His Son, Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, You gave to us the most precious gift of pure grace, Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, so that we might understand and embrace the boundlessness of Your Kingdom. Our faith leads us here in Your presence, we ask You to open our ears, our eyes, our minds and our hearts to your “inbreaking” in the being of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.