

Thy Kingdom Come

John 18:33-37

November 26, 2006

I.

Today is the end of the church year, the last Sunday in Pentecost. It might seem we are five weeks early. The church year, however, is based on the history and meaning of events in the church, and does not correspond to our calendar year, which is based on the earth's movement around the sun. We should not be surprised. Spiritual things can differ from worldly things.

This last Sunday of the church year is Christ the King Sunday. Today we examine who Jesus Christ really is, and we think about God's kingdom and what it means. This sets the stage for the new church year and the beginning of Advent when we not only reflect upon Christ's birth two thousand years ago but also anticipate his coming again in glory at the end of history.

All of today's readings are related to this second theme of Christ's coming again. The Collect of the Day described Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Old Testament reading from Daniel described a heavenly vision where God gave power and authority to one like a son of man, which is how Jesus described himself in all four Gospels. The Psalm celebrated the view of God's kingdom where God the Creator is sovereign over all things. Then the New Testament reading from Revelation proclaimed how God's kingdom will be made known to us.

And the Gospel reading from John ties it together. Christ stood before Pontius Pilate and said it all. Pilate, of course, did not understand, which is not surprising because as we heard over the last few months even Jesus' own disciples did not fully understand either.

II.

Let's try to imagine the scene described in the Gospel. Jesus was standing before Pilate on the morning of what is now Good Friday. He had been arrested by Roman soldiers the night before, and was dubiously charged with blasphemy in a bogus midnight trial by Jewish leaders.

Jesus had been up all night, had been abused, and probably looked like he had been through the wringer. And yet Pilate asked if he was king of the Jews. Jesus probably did not look like much of a king by Pilate's standards, but Pilate had to be sure Jesus was not a trouble maker.

The last thing Pilate wanted was a Jewish insurrection. Jewish rebels and zealots for years had been causing trouble around Jerusalem by resisting Roman rule, and some of them had been described as Jewish kings. So, Pilate wanted to find out whether or not Jesus was a security threat. He was concerned that Jesus might be some sort of political leader who could challenge Roman power.

Jesus' responses apparently satisfied Pilate's fears about sedition against Rome. Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world, and he backed that up by pointing out that his supporters and disciples made no effort to prevent him from being arrested the previous night. He did not challenge Roman authority.

So we see that Pilate was concerned about worldly kings, while Jesus proclaimed himself a heavenly king. Jesus was not talking about territory, or institutions, or governments. Instead, he was describing the heavenly source of his kingship rather than any worldly location.

III.

With that background, and before we go into what we mean when we acknowledge Christ as king, let's think about the kingdom. How do we understand God's kingdom? This is an important

question, not only for today's Gospel but also for our journey through Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter in the weeks ahead.

In the kingdom of God in the Old Testament, God was the supreme being who was sovereign over all creation, and who proclaimed his kingdom to be the people and land of Israel. However, Israel was not to be the end but rather the beginning. Israel was to be the light unto the nations of the earth, and through Israel the kingdom would be extended to all people.

God, however, gave us free will, and the people of Israel rebelled and did not do God's will. As a result Israel did not become a light unto the nations, and the people lost the promised land and went into exile. Even so, God later restored a remnant of the Jewish people and proclaimed that he would establish his reign over the entire world, for both Jews and Gentiles.

The New Testament tells us how this will occur. It tells us that the kingdom of God on earth was announced with the birth of Jesus Christ, it got underway with his earthly ministry, it continues to grow into its potential today through the church, and it finally will become complete when Christ returns again in power and glory.

IV.

So when Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, he proclaimed that God's heavenly kingdom had now come to earth. And he identified himself as the fulfillment of prophecy. We heard this in the reading from Daniel today, that the Son of Man would be given everlasting power and dominion, and his kingdom would be everlasting and not pass away.

That is quite a statement. Do we believe it? Who do we think Jesus is, really? Do we regard him as the King of kings and Lord of lords, or do we think of him in some other way?

I think it's safe to say that Jesus was not crucified just because he was a great teacher or a good man. The Jewish leaders who came to oppose Jesus could have lived with that. No, there was more to it. They saw him as a much greater threat to their way of doing things than Pontius Pilate ever did.

All four Gospels show that Jesus repeatedly spoke about his messianic role for humanity, that he claimed a special relationship with God, that he took it upon himself to forgive the sins of others, and that he frequently referred to himself as the Son of Man, which people of the time understood to be a divine title.

Then, when you add to it the fact that he raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons, you have a picture of an extremely unique and unusual person. Based on Old Testament prophecies, such as the reading from Daniel today, and based on Christ's own words and actions, some realities start to become clear.

The first and most compelling reality is that you simply cannot regard Jesus as a great teacher or as a good man. Jesus does not give us that option.

C.S. Lewis made this point over sixty years ago in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. He said then, and theologians have agreed with him since, that if Jesus were merely human he would have been regarded as egocentric, arrogant, and delusional. No mortal person could make the claims that Jesus made, and say the things that he said, and then get away with being called a great teacher or a good man.

There are only three ways we can regard Jesus. We can say that he is who he claimed to be, or we can say that he was mistaken about himself, or we can say that he knew he was not God but claimed he was in order to mislead people. There are no other choices. Let's look at them.

If we accept the Gospels and prophecies of Scripture, we can accept as true what Jesus said and did, and we can acknowledge that he is indeed the King of kings and Lord of lords. That, however, is a lot more than just being a great teacher or a good man.

Or we can decide that he was mistaken. We might conclude that Jesus actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not. This option, however, would compel the conclusion that he was a megalomaniac, or was crazy, or a madman. History has had its share of people who thought they were gods, and no one ever thought they were great teachers or good men.

Or finally, we could say that Jesus was a deceiver. We might say that he knew that he was not God, yet he intentionally misled people in order to gain a following. But he did gain a following that over the centuries has grown into the worldwide Christian Church with over a billion adherents today, and that doesn't even count the generations who have believed throughout the centuries. So if this is true, if Jesus did mislead us, then we are the most gullible and pathetic bunch of people who ever have lived on the face of the earth. That hardly is the legacy of a great teacher or good man.

The inescapable conclusion is that Jesus is who he said he was. He is the king of our lives, and his kingdom comes from God, just as he told Pontius Pilate in today's reading. As we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, we do so knowing that our faith is grounded in the truth.

V.

Or do we? Unfortunately our faith is not universally shared. There are those like Pilate who are worried more about earthly consequences than heavenly truths. In some ways Pontius Pilate comes across as a thoroughly modern man. Once he saw that Jesus was not a threat, he lost interest. He was concerned about his problems in real time, and notions of truth, and eternity, and the revelation of God just were not in his way of thinking.

Others, when they hear Jesus say that his kingdom is not of this world might say "whew! That's a relief. It's just a spiritual thing. It doesn't affect my job, or my retirement, or getting my kids to soccer games, or dancing lessons, or whatever, on time. I'll deal with that on Sunday, but now I have other things that are more important."

But people cannot do that if they believe that Christ is the King and that his birth was the beginning of God's kingdom. In fact, if we do believe that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, then it has a greater claim over us than the systems and institutions of the world that we experience every day. If Christ is the King, then we clearly are called to follow him and to lead our lives in ways that prepare us for the reality of his kingdom.

VI.

So, the end of the church year brings us full circle. During the past year we walked with Christ through the Gospels, and shared the significance of the manger, and the calling of Peter, James, John and the others. We stood at the cross and renewed our eternal hope through our Lord's resurrection. We heard once again how the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples, and we were witnesses to the inspired stories of Jesus' teachings to the church he left behind.

And no matter how many times we come to this point, the stories never grow old. It seems there always is something new and exciting that strengthens and comforts us. And it has been that way for countless generations over two thousand years. How is such a thing possible? How can the greatest story ever told remain so new and vital and alive?

Jesus Christ is the answer. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, and his kingdom comes to us from God. In the familiar language of our creeds we experience through him the means of grace of the hope of glory, and with him we look forward to the life of the world to come. *Amen.*