

Christ the King B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 21, 2021

John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On this final Sunday of the church year, our gospel reading comes from the fourth gospel, from the passion according to John which this congregation and most traditional churches read on Good Friday. The passion according to John is a huge and heavy chunk of scripture with many, many nuances. And one of those nuances lies in this dialog between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. Pilate in this gospel is one of many human characters whose minds seem to be too literal to understand Jesus. Nicodemus the Pharisee seems unable to comprehend what Jesus is talking about when Jesus talks about rebirth. Nicodemus asks if it is possible to go back into Mom's birth canal and come out again. This kind of thing happens with Peter, with Jesus' mother, with Thomas, with the sisters Mary and Martha. In the fourth gospel, both the good characters and the bad characters all seem to struggle to understand what Jesus is talking about. And Pontius Pilate, in addition to his own unique role in the story, is one part of this systemic misunderstanding of Jesus. From the opening of this fourth gospel, we are told: *The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. And: He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.* [John 1:5, 10-11] Comprehended it not, knew him not, received him not. The King James version says it with such Shakespearean cadence.

In today's reading, Pilate has heard this term being thrown around, "King of the Jews." He knows, everybody in the story knows, that this sort of thing is sedition, denying the authority of Rome in general and of Pilate in particular. In other words, claiming to be the king of the Jews is precisely the kind of crime that crucifixion was created to punish. Jesus diverts the question in a couple of ways. And then Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from here." Which Pilate, in his literal-mindedness, Pilate hears this as Jesus saying, "I'm not the king of the Jews. I'm a king visiting from somewhere else." Texas, perhaps. Or Tasmania. Or Tunisia. "So you are a king? So you *ARE* a king?" And Jesus diverts, deflects, pivots again. Jesus could have said, "I am the spiritual king of a spiritual people." But he didn't. "*YOU* say that 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." That's where today's reading stopped, but the next sentence is Pilate saying "What is truth?" and leaving the room.

The nuance is easy to miss, given everything else that is going on in this story. But Jesus admits to having a kingdom. But Jesus does not admit to being a king. And this is a moment when he asserts that his mission is truth, his purpose is truth. So I think he has a purpose here when he

confesses a kingdom but does not confess a kingship. Jesus indeed talks a great deal in the gospels about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, but Jesus does not refer to the kingdom of Christ. Jesus uses the expression “my kingdom” here in today’s gospel, and one other time in Luke. Paul the Apostle, also, who wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, refrains from referring to Jesus as king, even while talking about the kingdom on multiple occasions. I think that the gospel writers and Paul and Jesus himself would have mostly restricted the use of the word “king” to God the Father, the Creator, the Almighty, the first person of the Trinity. It gets a little more complicated because the Messiah is a sort of king, a sort of royal successor to King David. So because Jesus is so very prominently identified as the Messiah, the Christ, then Davidic kingship is sort of a corollary to that. And we’ll hear a lot of that in the weeks ahead, in the new church year, with Advent and Christmas. But being a messiah king from the line of David is perhaps a more modest thing than being the King of the Universe, which is a traditional Jewish title for God the Father.

I’m saying these things not because I want to undermine the celebration of Christ the King as we have it now. It’s fine to celebrate Jesus as king, particularly if we get right the *kind* of king that he is. *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* [Zechariah 9:9] Triumphant and victorious, says the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, but humble, and riding a mere donkey. His triumph is manifested in humility. His crown is not a crown of jewels but a crown of thorns. Something we must get right when we describe Jesus Christ as king. So I’m fine with celebrating Christ the King Sunday with great fanfare, so long as we get that part right.

But I want to heed today’s gospel reading, and I want to heed Jesus’ own words, which shift the focus away from his kingship and toward the kingdom that he proclaimed. The church year that is now ending was anchored in Mark’s gospel: *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’* [Mark 1:14-15] The kingdom of God has come near, Jesus said as he began. And soon he would give the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with this keynote statement: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* And he would go on to tell parables, many parables, about this kingdom.

- *What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*
- *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.*
- *For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. “For it is as if.”*
- *‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’*
- *When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’*

- *Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.*

The greatest Christian minds have tried to elucidate exactly what Jesus meant. But even the greatest Christian minds can fall into the trap that John's gospel sees Nicodemus, the mother of Jesus, Pontius Pilate, Thomas, Peter, and so many others falling into. A literal-mindedness which is what parables are intended to thwart. But I am confident that the kingdom of God is both perceptible and participatory. We are able to perceive it. And we are able to participate in it. It is the enterprise that God is engaged in. I'm confident of that, too. The kingdom is not a geographical location. It is something that we might call the work of God, or the life of God. Which Jesus came to bring to our attention. And to summon us to join. With limitations and flaws, we are able to perceive it. With limitations and flaws, we are able to participate in it.

The kingdom is not just something that God is going to do someday. Or going to bring someday. We're not here to sit around and twiddle our thumbs, asking God when, or how long, or what the schedule is. It is God's work, God's mission, God's good news, God's life, God's activity. But Jesus calls that the kingdom of God. (Sometimes the kingdom of heaven.) And our participation in the kingdom—our membership in the kingdom—begins now. Someday, somehow, Christ will be all in all. Someday, somehow, he will be king of kings, and lord of lords. But the kingdom is not someday, somehow. It has come near. If you are fortunate enough to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday this week, perhaps there will be moments when you perceive it. And participate in it. Have a wonderful Thanksgiving. And have a wonderful Christ the King. And as Revelation says this morning: To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.