

Proper 29 B 2021 (Christ the King)  
November 21, 2021 :: John 18: 33-37  
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## *“Not of this World.”*

So, here we are, having finally made it to the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost. It's a day also known as Christ the King Sunday, because today we are being reminded that Jesus is our King.

Now, that's a claim we might not take too seriously, because we haven't been ruled by a monarch for several hundred years. And, in fact, we fought a war to get out from under a monarch. And the form of government we chose for ourselves was that of a representative democracy. But the claim still stands that Jesus is our king, and so we have to deal with it.

So, I want to take a few minutes to explore one aspect of what it means to have Jesus as our King. And what it looks like to live in Jesus' kingdom. And to do that, we're going to have to take a closer look at our gospel reading.

At first blush, our gospel reading seems poorly suited for this topic, let alone this time of year. Because in our gospel reading, we

are transported back to a time when Jesus had already been betrayed by Judas, taken into custody by the Jewish religious authorities, and is being interrogated by Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. (Hardly the time or place for Jesus to be asserting claims of ultimate authority.)

But it's in that conversation that Jesus reveals something unique — and really, *really* important — about his kingdom. Pilate begins by asking Jesus if he is, in fact, the king of the Jews. And Jesus responds thus:

“My kingdom is not from this world. 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” (John 18:36).

Now, I have always interpreted that statement as Jesus asserting his independence — and the independence of his kingdom — from the kingdoms of this world. That is, the kingdoms of this world do things one way, while the kingdom of Jesus and his followers do things another way. And that's essentially true, but I've been

persuaded that this interpretation really doesn't go far enough. And I came to that understanding when I read what one scholar wrote, which was this:

“What Jesus might be saying ... is that, were he and his followers of this world, then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: [and that tool is] violence.

But Jesus is not of this world, and so Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom by violence. [And] Jesus will make no followers by violence.”

In other words, Jesus came to bear witness to truth that God is love (John 3:16). However, because we have not actually *seen* God, and, because it's really hard to imagine what God is like (John 1:18), *all too often* our notions of God and his ways, are shaped by our own experiences of authority figures in this world.

For example:

Rather than imagining that God (the ultimate authority figure) is love, we imagine God to be violent, because we live in a world where authority figures so often hold on to their power through the use of violence.

And rather than recognizing the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we might assume it's simply the legal mechanism of punishing Jesus *in our stead*, because we have way too many experiences with punitive relationships.

And rather than believing that God's acceptance of us is absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status *but only on the condition* that we fear him, and obey him, and praise him — *and* that despise those who don't fear or obey him — because so much of our life is operated as a *quid pro quo*.

But here's the thing: Jesus is *not* of this world. And that's why his followers will *not* fight to protect him. *Nor should anyone who follows Jesus ever resort to violence*, because to do so violates the very principles that undergird the kingdom of Jesus.

On some days, I'll tend to think this notion of non-violence is slowly catching on. In part because studies show that death by violence is at an historic low. However, and on other days — and because of the 24/7 news channels — it'll *seem* like violence is on the rise, infecting *every* aspect of society in general, and of human interactions in particular. And so, for me, sometimes it *feels* like the world is not an especially safe place.

And so, that's why we need to be reminded that Jesus is our king. And that the world *needs* the principles of Jesus' kingdom to be the predominant principles for human interaction. Because we still live in a world dominated by the notion that the only answer to violence is more violence.

And that's why we need to be reminded of something that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once wrote:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, [violence] multiplies it.

Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.

Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. [And so] it goes.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

So, where does all this leave us? I think, as the followers of King Jesus, we are left with two tasks. The first is to pray. And the second is to bear witness.

To pray that God will comfort those who  
mourn.

To pray that God will strengthen those who  
seek to thwart those who [use] violence, and  
bring them to justice.

To pray that God will change the hearts of  
those who can see no other way forward but  
through violence.

And to pray that God will equip all of us to  
work for a peace born of equity, for only such  
a peace can last.

And then, after our praying, we are called to bear witness:

To bear witness to the One who demonstrated  
power through weakness,.

To bear witness to the One who manifested  
strength through vulnerability,

who established justice through mercy,

and who built his kingdom by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world; taking its pain into his own body; dying the death that it sought; and rising again, to remind us that *light is stronger than darkness*, that *love is stronger than hate*, and that with God, all good things are possible.

And, finally, to give thanks to God for the witness, and the example, and the message of the life and death of Jesus our king. And to give thanks to God for all who proclaim the radical gospel of Jesus, and who bear witness to the way of a king who is so different than any of the others. Because it *seems to me* that the world needs to hear about all this, now more than ever.

Amen.