

Christ the King 21 November 2021

Meditation based on The kingship of Christ John 18. 33-37

What a huge clash of cultures we have in that reading from St John's gospel. Pilate represents the one and Jesus the other and it is a clash that has continued wherever the successors of Pilate meet the followers of Jesus. We have to look at the turmoil and unrest in so many parts of the world today to see that this clash is sadly still part of the scene.

Pilate is sometime painted as being a weak and vacillating person not really knowing what to do about this man Jesus. But some of the first century Jewish writers describe him as being a harsh man insensitive to the religious aspirations of the Jewish people. He had upset them in many ways. So it seems a bit strange that he seems to go out of his way to find a reason to release Jesus, not to yield to the demands of the crowd. But Pilate knew they were restless and resentful, looking for any opportunity to rebel and to take their grievances to Caesar and Pilate did not want that.

Pilate knows what he has to do. For someone to pretend to be a king on his patch is utterly absurd. Pilate knows about Kings and Kingdoms, so he asks Jesus outright: "Are you the King of the Jews?". The question is really absurd. There in front of him is Jesus, helpless and bleeding, with a small band of followers who have all run away. Pilate is contemptuous and mocking. He knows that Jesus is no threat to him, but he adds a final touch of contempt when he insists that the title "King of the Jews" is put above Jesus on the Cross.

Pilate is the one with the power, the one who calls the shots, the one who fears no rivals. What match is Jesus' power for the world conquering power of Rome? Here we see writ large a kingship marked by loveless power confronting a kingship marked by powerless love.

What do we understand about the kingdom of God? Jesus was clear when he said to Pilate "My kingdom is not from this world". It was so very different from the kingship of Pilate. It is absolutely not about worldly splendour or triumphalism or displays of military might. If it were like that, then the followers of Jesus would be out in the streets fighting for the leader. As he endured the torture of the cross, Jesus would speak words of forgiveness and thereby break the cycle of violence.

Here is a king whose throne is a cross, who reigns from the tree of Calvary. His kingdom is not “from here” because it is from God and the only weapons yielded within it are spiritual ones – faith, prayer, forbearance, compassion, love and mercy. Those who live in his kingdom seek not to dominate but to liberate others, setting them free to love God and one another. Peace is its highest priority not just in the form of the cessation of hostilities but in the more positive sense of nurturing creative and life enhancing relationships that all people may flourish. As Jesus said earlier “I have come that you may have life and have it in its fullness”.

No wonder that Pilate and Jesus clashed. They stood for completely opposite views of life. Pilate served an empire founded on violence and maintained by violence. But violence achieves nothing worthwhile. If that way wins out, then most of us are reduced to nothing: the masses are there to be manipulated and exploited. Against all of that, Jesus calls us to serve him: to take up **our** cross and accept all the difficulty, the danger and often the disappointment that comes from opposing the powers of this world. And we will persevere by constantly reminding ourselves that Jesus will ultimately be victorious. Jesus stands today with the victimised, he comforts the broken hearted and strengthens the weak, he upholds those who against the odds, witness to the truth. We believe that it is God’s love through vanquishing death, that will finally transcend this world and lead us to that glorious future when the lamb will sit upon the throne and when the whole of creation will know complete fulfilment and peace.

I conclude with words from a familiar hymn: (The day thou gavest Lord is ended)

“So be it Lord; thy throne shall never
Like earth’s proud empires pass away
Thy kingdom stands and grows forever,
Till all thy creatures own they sway”

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