

The Rev. Stephen W. Best
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
November 22, 2009
Christ the King Sunday
John 18:33-37

No Ordinary Kingdom

As much as we Americans claim to live in a royalty-free zone of the world, we are, in fact, enamored by them. However, this is Christ the King Sunday, and we are here to celebrate no ordinary kingdom.

This last Tuesday, many of you attended the official installation of Lex as our rector and celebration of our new ministry with Lex in this place. Now, “rector” is certainly a loaded word. Its etymological roots go back to Roman times, and the word “regal” is derived from the same root. Rector originally referred to Roman governors, gods, and rulers who were empowered to govern the people with almost unlimited power.

Thank God this is not what Lex has bought into or what we have bought into. It was not a coronation of a king! Rather than receiving a sword, a scepter, or a royal treasury, our dear Rector Lex was given the gifts of an alternative kingdom in which servant leadership rules.

Lex was given a Bible to proclaim the liberating Good News of Jesus Christ, a vessel of baptismal water to heal and to bring forth new life within our community, Eucharistic bread and wine to feed and nourish others, and a key to our church to open wide the doors of this place to all people in the hopes of reconciling the world.

Despite all the beautiful colors, glorious music, and sacred ritual that filled that evening, our focus remained worshipful and focused on service to God, to each other, and to a world that so badly needs to see

a different kind of power than the kind of power associated with violence, exploitation, and oppression.

This question of power is at the heart of today's gospel lesson and is central to understanding Christ's kingdom. In today's story, the chief priests and the most influential Jewish leaders have turned Jesus over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who is the most powerful ruler in the region. Although it is a story most commonly associated with the events of Holy Week, it also serves as a backdrop for the upcoming season of Advent as we look forward to the birth of the Messiah and the in-breaking of God's kingdom into our world.

Ironically, it is Pilate, and not the Jewish community, who ultimately becomes the central interpreter of Jesus' mission by asking the question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate confronts Jesus and Jesus confronts Pilate in a battle of wills and worldviews. Pilate is obsessed with preserving his personal empire and that of Rome's. He is walking on a political tightrope: attempting to avoid a local uprising which might result in his removal, but on the other hand, he has a need to remain in control so that the Roman Empire's interests, largely financial, remain protected.

This is Jesus' defining moment as a leader. He knows that Pilate and Rome only know one kind of king and one type of kingdom—that is why he is reluctant to answer Pilate directly. Pilate's kingdom is rooted in violence and controlling people through fear. Jesus' kingdom is the opposite. Jesus knows that he has been called to bring about God's kingdom of love and forgiveness ... and to do it nonviolently.

Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world. And yet, what exactly does this mean? Could it mean that his kingdom is in heaven only and

never on this earth, which is governed by the laws of the jungle found operating in school playgrounds, corporate board rooms, suburban bedrooms, and church meetings?

Could it mean that Jesus' kingdom will occur in some distant future, or when Christ returns in some cataclysmic battle between good and evil? Or making a more mystical interpretation, could it be that the matter of God's kingdom is primarily an interior process which has little or nothing to do with the exterior world or politics, economics, or organized religion?

These are all important questions Christians have wrestled with for centuries. But one thing which is very clear is that Jesus intends for his kingdom to be nonviolent: "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...." This is a direct reference to the 18th chapter of John, in which Jesus' complete commitment to nonviolence is demonstrated in his commanding his disciple Peter to sheath his sword after Peter cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus, on the occasion of Jesus' arrest at Gethsemane.

Do you remember the rest of the story? It doesn't stop there. And even more than stopping the violence, Jesus brings about healing by mending the severed ear, placing it back on the slave's head—undoing through compassion what was done through violence.

Bestselling author and prominent biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan, in his book *God and Empire*, points us to this new world and new kingdom of nonviolence that Jesus says we all belong to and are called to bring about in our families, schools, workplaces, churches and communities. "The good news ... is that the violent normalcy of human

civilization is not the inevitable destiny of human nature ... Since we invented civilization some six thousand years ago along the irrigated floodplains of great rivers, we can also *un-invent* it—we can create its alternative.”

Our Christian faith challenges us to cooperate with one another and all who inhabit this planet and to work towards establishing transformed kingdoms right now and right here on this earth. Nowhere has this brave experiment been so clearly tried than in South Africa. After the horrible system of apartheid was dismantled, the people of South Africa where faced with the problem of healing their deeply divided country.

President Nelson Mandela appointed Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu to be the chair of the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (If you haven't already, go into our chapel, where you can see a stained glass window made to commemorate this historic ministry of social justice.) It was the task of this Commission to provide a safe and humane process for the truth regarding the atrocities which occurred during South Africa's civil war to come to the surface in such a way that truer and deeper reconciliation could occur.

Resisting the temptation to resort to a crime-and-punishment model for instituting justice, the controversial commission granted amnesty to those perpetrators of violence who honestly and completely confessed their wrongdoing. This groundbreaking truth and reconciliation model is by no means perfect and certainly has its fair share of critics, but we all know that the older retribution model is greatly flawed, as it frequently prevents the full truth from coming out because the accused conceal or minimize what really happened in order to protect themselves from civil or criminal prosecution.

It remains to be seen in the long run whether this truth and reconciliation model is ultimately more successful than the “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” model of retribution which has been in place for most of our human history. But I think that most of you would agree with me that it is extremely important that new models be tried.

In fact, it is interesting to note that since the South African experiment was tried, there have been 17 other countries, from such far-flung places in the world as Argentina, Ghana, South Korea, the Solomon Islands, Canada, and the United States, that have adapted the truth and reconciliation model to their own cultural context in order to address their own unique legacies of violence.

The truth and reconciliation movement is alive and well within our own borders as well. Award-winning journalist and blogger Joshua Micah Marshall has called for a commission to be formed to investigate U.S.-sponsored torture in Iraq and elsewhere.

The truth and reconciliation movement in Canada is especially relevant in that it involves the Anglican Church. Their commission is largely comprised of Native American survivors of the widespread abuse which occurred for many years within Canada’s residential schools for aboriginal peoples. This school system was administered in partnership with the Anglican Church. Both the church and the state have been found guilty of gross negligence, racial prejudice, abuse, and mismanagement of the entire aboriginal educational system.

Rather than perpetuating a legal process in which truth is distorted or concealed and adversaries created, this commission of survivors is using the principle of witnessing found in the Native American tradition

to create sacred rituals, truthful sharing on the part of perpetrators and victims, and storytelling which leads to healing memories of the past.

In the words of the commission, “There is a emerging and compelling desire to put the events of the past behind us ... This is a profound commitment to establishing new relationships, embedded in mutual recognition and respect that will forge a brighter future. The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation.”

One of the arenas closest to my heart in which reconciliation ministries are so badly needed is in working with parishes within our own diocese that are experiencing high degrees of conflict or trauma caused by the misconduct of church leaders. The message I hear time and again is, “If only the victims and perpetrators could both hear and discuss together the truth of what happened, rather than position themselves defensively in the context of a legal process which often obstructs healing in the long run.”

And this leads us back to the Gospel and the words of Jesus: “Pilate, my kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over ... You say that I am a king [but not as I imagine being a king]. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. [It is no ordinary kingdom.] Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” May God’s kingdom of truth and reconciliation rule in our hearts and one day rule all the kingdoms of this world. Amen.