

sermon-11/22/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Mixing Religion and Politics”  
John 18:33-38a

Today marks the end of another year. By year, I mean the spiritual year, the year that governs our inner life, the really important year the secular culture either dismisses or avoids. This is Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday we start a new liturgical year with Advent.

The liturgical year is quite fascinating. It begins with waiting in Advent. We wait for the birth of God’s Christ to be born into our world once again. The year then progresses through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, Easter and the Day of Pentecost. It progresses from waiting, to birth, life, death, and resurrection, and the giving of the Spirit.

All of those seasons barely take up half of the liturgical year. The rest of the year following the Day of Pentecost until Christ the King Sunday lasts for six months or more. We call that time Ordinary Time. It is a time to make sense of the implications of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. What difference does Jesus make in our lives?

As we sort out those implications the year builds to a powerful religious, and even a political, in the broadest sense of that word, affirmation: Christ is King, not Caesar. We give our allegiance to Christ and not any lesser political or material reality or value. Christ will define our lives. Christ will set our priorities.

Today we are going to talk about all of that in the context of the scripture the lectionary gives us to contemplate on this year’s Christ the King Sunday. That scripture comes to us in John’s Gospel. It is just one part of a larger section of John, chapters eighteen and nineteen, that deals with Jesus’ arrest and trial before Annas, Caiaphas, and then eventually Pilate, where our scripture enters the story.

It is important to read the whole section to get what John is doing in this part of his gospel. We will see that there is more than one trial going on in these two chapters. One of the trials concerns Peter. As you remember Peter follows the soldiers after they arrest Jesus. He is in the courtyard trying to see what is going to happen. He gets accused of being one of Jesus’ followers. He denies that accusation three times. Then the cock crows. Peter is guilty of cowardice and even treason to God’s kingdom in Christ.

Peter represents the Church. The Church was on trial in John’s gospel, written some 70 years after the death of Jesus. And the Church fails that trial. The Church, personified by Peter, fails to be loyal to Jesus when there would be a cost to that loyalty.

Sadly, not much has changed over the years. The majority of Church members in any age do not step up to the plate in their loyalty to Jesus and the kingdom values he espoused, especially if that would mean paying a price. This passage is not a comfortable one for us to read if we are honest with ourselves.

Note also, as one commentator points out, it was not just Peter who fails his trial. The religious leaders of that day, the people John calls the Jews, also fail their test. She writes, "Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion." That is very sobering to contemplate.

When we get to our passage, and what follows in chapter nineteen, the two big issues that jump out at us are these: violence versus non-violence and the word "truth." These two issues are at the heart of what we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday.

There is no getting around the fact that Jesus urged non-violence. When Peter tried to protect Jesus in the garden, cutting off the ear of that poor servant, Jesus told him to put away his sword. Those who follow Jesus are not to be about armed conflict. We know this to be the case from what historians tell us about the early Church. Many of those immediate followers of Jesus refused to serve in the Roman army. Being a Christian and being willing to kill others, even for good reasons, just did not mix.

This is brought home when Pilate offers the religious leaders the choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas was a violent revolutionary. His cause was certainly just. He was fighting against Roman oppression. His cause was liberty, freedom, and the right to choose one's own leaders. Who can argue against that?

Jesus wanted to bring about change non-violently. Given those two options, the religious leaders chose Barabbas. Sadly, good religious folks down through the years have almost always chosen violence over non-violence when it comes to protecting their rights, fighting for freedom, or responding to aggression.

This country did exactly that after 9/11. One wonders how things would be different if we had chosen a different way to deal with those terrorist attacks. Certainly our pre-emptive strike in Iraq is cause for concern for many of us because of the precedent that set. While we in this country have not seen another terrorist attack on our land, thousands of other innocent civilians in other lands have not been protected by our approach to fighting terrorism. We may even have spawned more terrorists who hate us for invading their country.

Is pacifism the only faithful choice for Christians? That is a tough question. Personally I would not want to go that far. Many Biblical commentators would not say that pacifism is the only legitimate Christian option. But some do say that Christians ought to feel the tension between a realistic use of power and violence and God's kingdom that urges non-violence.

When we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, when we say Christ is our leader, Christ's values determine our values, Christ's methods inform our methods, we should never jump to violent solutions easily or as the first resort. There should never be a sense of glee over dropping bombs on our enemies, even in a just cause. All diplomatic options need to be tried before ever reluctantly resorting to other options. We can never act as if

the lives of innocent civilians in our enemy's country are worth less than civilians in our own. We are all children of God. That is the political implications for Christians when we call Christ King. That is challenging.

The next issue is truth. Scholars point out that the word "truth" appears twenty-five times in the gospel of John. It appears in the other three gospels only seven times combined! That tells you how important the concept of truth is for John.

In our passage Pilate is stumped by Jesus' comment that he came to testify to the truth. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" He may have asked that sarcastically as some believe, but it is a good question none-the-less. Christ the King Sunday wants to make very sure we understand what we mean when we say truth.

As the *People's New Testament Commentary* says, truth is not about a what, but a who. Let me quote this commentary because they say it so well. In John's gospel, "Jesus is never said to teach the truth. . . Truth is not an object, a body of material that can be possessed. Jesus is not a great teacher who gives disciples 'great truths' to live by. He gives himself; he himself is God's truth. . . Truth is a matter of worship and commitment. . . Truth is a matter of doing, of ethics, of wanting to do the will of God, not a matter of abstract principles one may weigh objectively and then decide whether what Jesus teaches is true."

That is a mouthful, but that is also incredibly important. When we call Christ King, we are affirming he embodied the truth. We are in the truth when we are in a relationship with God in Christ. It is not a matter of beliefs. It is not a matter of belonging to the right religious community. It is all about embracing the truth Jesus lived out in his sacrificial loving, in his concern for the poor, his emphasis on non-violence, and his speaking about grace having the last word. When any in other religions embrace those realities, they are in a relationship with the truth.

All of that is what it means to call Christ King. Marcus Borg puts it very plainly. He says, if we lived in Germany during World War II, and wanted to call Christ King or Lord, we would say "Jesus is mein Furher," not Hitler. In the U.S. today we would say, "Jesus is my commander and chief," not the President.

This cuts to the heart of how we live, and who we follow. If ever there is a conflict between what God is calling us to do and what other authorities in our lives ask of us, we are to follow God. This is radical stuff, and, as some note, "subversive." It is no wonder Pilate agreed to execute Jesus as a political prisoner and subversive. Dare we call Christ King in our day? Amen