



Liturgical Day: Christ the King Sunday
Date: November 26, 2006
Title: King of kings and Lord of lords

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

I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving celebration this past week. Thanksgiving Day can be a terrific day – a chance to spend time with family, either by getting together for dinner, or by checking in over the phone. I am reminded every year of the wide variety of characters that make up so many of our families. Doting mothers. Crazy uncles. Ageing grandparents. Newlywed nieces or nephews. Newborn grandchildren. Family members are so different from one another, it seems, that you wonder if there is any chance they'd ever get together if they weren't related to each other. I've heard a number of stories this past month about what folks were anticipating as they prepared to get together with family members – and I'd guess that for some of you, it was an interesting couple of days.

Our families are sometimes made up of an odd assortment of characters – and that is true for the Biblical family as well. There are so many interesting Biblical characters. Some of them are a bit elusive – we seem to know very little about them. I think of Joseph (the father of Jesus), or Bartholomew (the disciple of Jesus), or Titus (a co-worker of Paul). Other members of the Biblical family are introduced to us at great length – we almost know a bit more about them than we wish we did. I think of Father Abraham, or King David, or Saint Peter, or the Apostle Paul.

This morning's Gospel text focuses on a Biblical character who plays quite a significant role in the story, but who is almost entirely unknown to us. Pontius Pilate is the one whose command sends Jesus to his death, but other than his questioning of Jesus (one of the few stories that are covered by all four of the Evangelists), we know very little about him. Luke tells us that he was governor of Judea at the time when Jesus was born, and later reports on a rather bloody attempt by Pilate to silence those who were offering their sacrifice at an altar in Galilee. But that is it. Everything else the Bible tells us about Pontius Pilate is related to the occasion covered in this morning's Gospel lesson: the questioning of Jesus by Pilate in the governor's headquarters – what St. John calls the Praetorium.

Frederick Buechner, whose insights into Biblical characters are always interesting to me, has this to say about Pilate:

As the Roman governor, Pilate had the last word. He could have saved Jesus if he'd wanted to, and all indications are that for various reasons that's what he'd like to have done... To make it perfectly clear that he wanted no part in the dirty business... he said, "I am innocent of this man's blood," and as a dramatic gesture that not even the dullest colonial clod among them could fail to understand, stepped out in front of the crowd and went through a ritual hand-washing in a basin of water he'd had them fill especially for that purpose (Mathew 27:24)...

He could have stuck to his guns and resisted the pressure and told the

FIRST LESSON
DANIEL 7:9-10, 13-14

PSALM
PSALM 93

SECOND LESSON
REVELATION 1:4B-8

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. JOHN 18:33-37

PRAYER OF THE DAY
ALMIGHTY AND
EVERLASTING GOD, WHOSE
WILL IT IS TO RESTORE ALL
THINGS TO YOUR BELOVED
SON, WHOM YOU
ANOINTED PRIEST FOREVER
AND KING OF ALL
CREATION: GRANT THAT
ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE
EARTH, NOW DIVIDED BY THE
POWER OF SIN, MAY BE
UNITED UNDER THE
GLORIOUS AND GENTLE RULE
OF YOUR SON, OUR LORD
JESUS CHRIST, WHO LIVES
AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND
THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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chief priests to go to Hell, where they were obviously heading anyway. He could have spared the man's life. Or if that is asking too much, he could have spared him at least the scourging and catcalls and the appalling way he died. Or if that is still asking too much, he could have spoken some word of comfort when there was nobody else in the world with either the chance or the courage to speak it. He could have shaken his hand. He could have said goodbye. He could have made some two-bit gesture which, even though it would have made no ultimate difference, to him would have made all the difference.

But he didn't do it, he didn't do it, and on that basis alone you can almost believe the sad old legend is true that again and again his body rises to the surface of a mountain lake and goes through the motion of washing its hands as he tries to cleanse himself not of something he'd done, for which God could forgive him, but of something he might have done, but hadn't, for which he could never forgive himself.ⁱ

It used to be so hard for me to identify with Pontius Pilate; this man who lived so long ago; this man who was a brutal and uncaring local ruler; this man who stood face-to-face with Jesus; this man whose permission led to the death of Jesus. I always had a hard time relating to him. But lately that has changed. Lately I've become intrigued with Pilate, and I wonder if some aspects of how he related to Jesus (or failed to) are quite similar to people's experience today.

You see, this morning we are celebrating *Christ the King Sunday*: a day when the church makes the bold claim that we live as if Christ were our King. As Lutherans, one of our theological traditions is the belief that we live in two kingdoms. On the one hand, we live in the kingdom of God, where grace rules, and where forgiveness is able to transform even the most reluctant and resistant of people. In that kingdom, we find ourselves loved and cherished by a powerful God, whose deepest desire is for us to know the depths of grace that are available to us. On the other hand, we live in the kingdom of this world, where sin and brokenness are displayed in people's disobedience, and where governments, armies and social structures seek to limit the damage that human beings tend to inflict on one another.

On Christ the King Sunday, we proclaim that even though we may live in these two kingdoms at the same time, our ultimate citizenship is in the Kingdom of God. Any passport we may carry that is issued by a government in today's world is secondary to the promises that are ours in baptism. In effect, we are asked a bold question today: Is Christ our King or not?

There are many in our world who refuse to answer that question. There are many who live as if their allegiance to Christ and their allegiance to the powers of this world are completely compatible. Their capacity for forgiveness, their care for the poor, their commitment to justice, their desire to know God's heart – in these ways they are no different from their friends and neighbors who are not Christians. There is no way to tell whether or not Christ is their King. That may seem like a very modern attribute.

But I wonder if they aren't in the same predicament that Pilate found himself in. To the casual observer, it seems as though Jesus is on trial in today's text. But a more careful look reveals that it is, in fact, Pilate who is on trial. The trial is seeking to determine whether or not he will acknowledge Jesus as King. Will he see the truth that is embodied in this man's life and ministry?

Pilate tried his hardest not to answer that question. By his elusive questioning, and his attempts not to be pinned down, he showed us that he felt stuck in the middle. He wanted no part of putting

ⁱ Peculiar Treasures; A Biblical Who's Who, by Frederick Buechner (Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, ©1979) pages 137-139.

Jesus to death. And he wanted no part of angering the crowd. So he tried to walk a middle ground between those convictions – and clearly failed at it. He tried to be equally at home on either side of the equation, and found it impossible. But not to answer is to answer. He showed, by his unwillingness to recognize the truth in the life of Jesus, that Christ was certainly not his king. He had other, higher priorities in his life. He was willing to ignore his conscience, and send Jesus to his death.

In some respects, the conversation between Jesus and Pilate stands at the climax of St. John's Gospel. It is a lengthy dialog – some thirty verses – and serves as the transition to the passion of Jesus – the section of John's Gospel that describes how Jesus gave life for the world.

Perhaps John, in emphasizing this conversation, is seeking to put the same question to you and me: Is Christ our King or not? We are happy to consider him as Savior – his grace puts us right with God. We are happy to consider him as Lord – his life stands as an example of what it means to live in a godly manner. But are we willing to call him King? Are we willing to grant him our ultimate allegiance? Are we willing to follow him, even in those times when his command conflicts with the expectations laid upon us by our own political, social, economic, or familial allegiances?

I'm sure there are times in each of our lives when we want to create some distance between the radical claims of Jesus and the way we live our lives. There are times when we long to be just like our friends and neighbors. There are times when we prefer the simplicity of not living with citizenships in two radically different kingdoms" "Habits of discipleship: they are for fanatics. We'll stop by church now and again, and call it good." But this Sunday's text doesn't allow for that kind of distance. It calls us to examine whether or not we are willing to claim Jesus as our ultimate King.

We've recently seen the faith and courage of the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. I am reminded of an old story about an Amish man was once asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist whether he had been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. The gentleman replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I've been saved." ⁱⁱ

A choice lies before each of us. Graced by God, forgiven by Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, what path will we take through life? Will our love for this world could cause us to live an unremarkable life – so blended in with our surroundings that we're invisible? Or will our commitment to Christ the King invite us into an entirely different way of living? As we celebrate this *Christ the King Sunday*, my prayer is that we won't have to declare with words who our King is. Instead, may we live in such a way that, like the Amish man, it is apparent to our banker, our grocer, or any who might work with us or for us.

Amen.

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ⁱⁱ From "Gospel Notes for Next Sunday" by Pastor Brian Stoffregen, available at http://www.faithgroups.com/topic/GOSPEL_NOTES_FOR_NEXT_SUNDAY -- or contact Pastor Stoffregen at b.stoffregen@worldnet.att.net.

English Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "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." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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."

³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ^{iv}

Greek Text:

³³ Εἰσηλθὼν οὖν πάλιν εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον ὁ Πιλάτος καὶ ἐφώνησεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ³⁴ ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· ἀπὸ σεαυτοῦ σὺ τοῦτο λέγεις ἢ ἄλλοι εἶπον σοι περὶ ἐμοῦ; ³⁵ ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Πιλάτος· μήτι ἐγὼ Ἰουδαῖος εἰμι; τὸ ἔθνος τὸ σὸν καὶ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς παρέδωκαν σε ἐμοί· τί ἐποίησας; ³⁶ ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· ἡ βασιλεία ἢ ἐμὴ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου· εἰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἦν ἡ βασιλεία ἢ ἐμὴ, οἱ ὑπηρέται οἱ ἐμοὶ ἠγωνίζοντο [ἀν] ἵνα μὴ παραδοθῶ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις· νῦν δὲ ἡ βασιλεία ἢ ἐμὴ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐντεῦθεν. ³⁷ εἶπεν οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· οὐκοῦν βασιλεὺς εἶ σύ; ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς· σὺ λέγεις ὅτι βασιλεὺς εἰμι. ἐγὼ εἰς τοῦτο γεγέννημαι καὶ εἰς τοῦτο ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον, ἵνα μαρτυρήσω τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· πᾶς ὁ ὢν ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκούει μου τῆς φωνῆς.

³⁸ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· τί ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια; Καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν πάλιν ἐξῆλθεν πρὸς τοὺς Ἰουδαίους καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ οὐδεμίαν εὕρισκω ἐν αὐτῷ αἰτίαν. ^v

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^{iv} St. John 18:33-37, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^v St. John 18:33-37, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).