

The Power Over Us: Christ the King Sunday

A sermon preached by The Rev. Canon Joanna Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 26, 2006.

Not too long ago, a powerful nation celebrates its victory over a smaller country. They still need armed occupation, of course, and people are slaughtered every day, to keep the peace. There are deep pockets of resistance from the population, partly because the occupying culture deeply offends their religious beliefs. Sometimes the people resist violently, and the occupying army retaliates, also violently. But you can say that peace is on the way. Occupation leaders have proclaimed victory through their overwhelming military power. The benefits of conquest will someday be many: better trade, international commerce, secure borders, and domestic tranquility. Banners, flags, buttons, and bumper stickers proudly boast of the nation's stupendous military strength and its superior culture. On a rock outside the city, somebody has scrawled graffiti on a wall. It says: *Romans Always Win.*

Around the same time, a young man offers to his beleaguered people an alternate reality. The kingdom of this world, he says, is bankrupt. The old order of fear and domination is bankrupt. But the Kingdom of God is here. Its power comes from God, and it offers not violence and destruction, but life and healing – especially for the poor and the oppressed. Its only weapons are peace, love, mercy, and forgiveness. Its army is righteousness and truth. It just so happens that this counter-reality, this Kingdom of God, is a threat to the dominating authorities –not because they oppose peace and love. Everybody is for peace and love, of course. But allegiance to God is seen as a threat to other allegiances –the State, for example, and the religious institution, and the social order that keeps everybody in their place. So Jesus is arrested. Taken with violence, he gives himself up in peace.

Now, two powers face each other. One represents the power of Rome, the other the power of God. One is on trial, the other is the judge. Their dialogue is a classic example of what in the '60's we called "being on different wavelengths." Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" "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. But my kingdom is not from here." Pilate seems confused. This answer does not compute. What is a government without the power of force? What kind of king has followers that don't resist by violence the violence done to their leader? "So you are a king?" Jesus answers: "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."

Jesus is The Truth. As The Truth, Jesus exposes as lies all oppressive worldly pretensions to power, including Pilate and the source of his power. Does Pilate belong to the truth? Will Pilate listen to Jesus' voice? Who is on trial now? Not Jesus, but Pilate. God is bringing Pilate and his claim to authority to trial. Pilate's famous next question is "And what is truth?" Pilate doesn't even know what truth is. He doesn't know Truth when he is looking right at it, talking to it. And for this reason, he doesn't know how deeply subversive Jesus' message is, subversive not to Pilate's political life, or to Rome's militaristic rule. Jesus' message subverts the whole worldly order that lives on fear, domination of others, violence toward the weak. It threatens every power that would take us away from God's way of justice and mercy.

In Jesus' trial before Pilate, Jesus challenges the kingdom of domination. By his self-sacrifice on the cross, Jesus says *No* to the power of violence by refusing to be defeated by it. By raising Jesus from the dead, God says *No* to the power of Rome to kill and affirms the power of Jesus to heal and give life. Power does not reside in military strength or oppression of the weak. True power belongs to God. True power is found in vulnerable, self-giving love, in the Lamb of God led silently to the slaughter.

Some people want to turn this Lamb of God into a kind of Terminator Lamb, who comes back at the end of time to kill off everybody who is not a true believer. But at his death Jesus doesn't say with a scowl, "I'll be back." *Rome* would do that. *Jesus* says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." All the way to the end, Jesus is a faithful witness to God, living right up to the end the life given to God.

Now it is our turn. Episcopalians generally don't like either/or choices. But we do choose our loyalties, just by the way we live. So the trial in John's Gospel places before us a choice: the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of Jesus. The chief priests made their choice: "We have no king but Caesar." Will we be able to say, "We have no king but Jesus"? The question is, who has power over us? Where is our loyalty and our allegiance? Who are the Pilates of our lives? What is the Rome by which we personally are governed?

Of course, in America we don't concentrate worldly power in the person of a king. In this culture, it's safe to say that we really have no king but Elvis. But we do have a vast array of industrial, military, and commercial powers, including but not limited to our political state. We face the powers of capitalism, free enterprise, technology, and advertising. We face a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust and contentiousness. We face the temptation to fend only for ourselves, to return violence with violence, to blame the poor for their own suffering, to turn our backs on those who are different from us. These are the powers of the world.

The power wielded by Christ the King is shown to us at his trial, and demonstrated on the cross. At his trial, he speaks truth to power, even if it costs him his life. At his trial, he affirms the nonviolence of his kingdom. And I believe that at his trial, he is probably told to water down his message of justice to the poor and the oppressed and he refuses to do so. Instead, he remains faithful to the mission that he was born to carry out, and his faithfulness to God does cost him his life. At Jesus' crucifixion, he continues to open wide his arms – allows them to be nailed open – so that even the Roman centurion feels his grace, and the two thieves, and his mother Mary and beloved disciple John, brought together by Jesus as mother and son. The power of Christ the King is the power of vulnerable love. It is the power of weakness, and forgiveness, and total self-giving. It may look at first like the Romans always win, but in the end, God will win. In the end, the power of the kingdom of God wins, because when we live in the power of God's kingdom, we are not taken in by the fleeting enticements of this world. *We* look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The slaughter in Iraq is reaching appalling levels. Suffering continues in the rest of the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Darfur. In Northern Ireland, a man comes to a meeting with a bagful of

pipe bombs. In this country, political leaders of both parties jostle for positions of power and influence after months of verbal assaults on one another. In this city, places that care for the poor – like the Anna Louise Inn, the Drop-Inn Center and the FreeStore FoodBank – are threatened with loss of the city's financial support.

Meanwhile, the cross of Christ the King shows us what we can do when we make our choice for the kingdom of Christ. Jesus Christ, the King of kings, the king of all creation, stands before all his creation, including the powerbrokers of this world. He holds in his pierced hands the starving, the unwanted, the abused, and all those who are shunned by important and powerful people. He holds them out to us. We are Christ's agents, who have benefited from his mercy, and now we are called to be merciful people, serving God's kingdom. Here's what we can do, with the power of vulnerable love, the power of self-giving, the power of the cross of Christ: We can tell the truth to the Pilates of the world. We can put the Romes of the world – and in our hearts -- on trial by insisting on truth. We can refuse to comply with unjust empires and systems that work against the values of the reign of God. We can be faithful witnesses of Christ, proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. And we can be the Church, that messianic community that lives no longer for itself, but for him who died for us and rose again. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.