

Last Sunday After Pentecost ***November 22, 2009***

I want to talk mostly this morning about those familiar words of Jesus we just heard in the Gospel. It's where Jesus says to Pilate, "my kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting..." and I'll get to that in just a minute; but first they need a bit of background.

We hear so much about kings and kingdoms in the readings today because this is Christ the King Sunday—which is the more or less official name of the last Sunday after Pentecost. Before I get into those verses, I want to say just a little about the history of the feast; it's both interesting and relevant. In 1925 Pope Pius the XI first introduced the Feast of Christ the King. It was hit, and by the 1960's Anglican and most mainline Protestant Churches had included it in their calendars. But the original context was quickly forgotten; and it shouldn't be. You see, 1925 was the year Benito Mussolini abolished democracy in Italy and set himself up as *Dulce*—the sole ruler of the state—and demanded the allegiance of the whole country. (The official king, Victor Emmanuel, didn't count for much those days.)

In part, the Feast of Christ the King was the Pope's response to Mussolini's claim of absolute power. It was a way of saying, "hey, wait a minute, *Dulce* doesn't say everything that there is to be said about kingdoms, or about power, or about glory. There's more to it than that". It's useful to keep this background in mind as we go to John's telling of Good Friday, and the trial of Jesus.

It can help remind us that, when Jesus speaks of his kingdom, he's not only talking to Pontius Pilate—he's also talking to Mussolini, and to every claim of power and authority. That's who he's talking to. But what is he saying, what does it mean for Jesus' kingdom—or kingship, or rule, or reign, all are good translations—to be not 'from this world'?

Lots of times, this is taken to mean that Jesus' kingdom is purely spiritual, something other-worldly, not really connected with the grubby materiality of earthly things—existing perhaps in the human heart, or in another sphere, or in another place. So, conveniently, Jesus' rule doesn't mess with, or conflict with, whatever might be going on in *this* world, and with whatever rulers this world might have. So Jesus and Pilate, or Jesus and Mussolini, or Jesus and whoever, operate in separate realities, and neither one needs to have anything to do with the other. That's a real common reading, and I think it's wrong, rather seriously wrong.

The best place to start with this is with the notion of the world, from which Jesus' kingdom is not. Remember, this is John's gospel, and John has a very particular use for some of his favorite words. 'World' is one of those favorite words. In John, 'world' doesn't usually mean the physical reality that surrounds us and includes rocks, bunnies, and us, or at least our bodies. Instead, in John's gospel, the word 'world' has a very specific meaning, it means the reality in which existence takes place without being shaped by God's love and purposes. It means humanity organized without regard to God.

So when Jesus insists, eight chapters earlier in the Gospel, that *he* is "not of this world" he doesn't mean that came from a spaceship, or that he is not a human being. Instead, Jesus is saying that his vision—the principles and priorities, the way of understanding our lives and our place in creation that he brings—that these are not something he made up, nor are they suggested as a possibly useful way to win friends and influence people. Instead, Jesus' vision is offered in stark contrast to the ways of the world. His vision is the way of God—the way of self-giving love—that he insists is the true destiny of all that the Father has made.

In exactly the same way, when Jesus says that *his kingdom* is not from this world, he is talking about the *origin*, and not the *location*, of that kingdom.

This makes the confrontation with Pilate even more interesting. After all, Pilate is Rome. He represents all of the conventional notions of power— notions we know very well. That kingdom is very much from the world. And Pilate thinks that he is in control of existence. Instead, and with wonderful irony, it is the prisoner Jesus who represents the different way, the way that leads to life. These two kingdoms—Jesus and Pilate—are not irrelevant to one another, they are in direct and absolute conflict. That's the first thing about his kingdom that Jesus proclaims.

And he says two more things about the kingdom. First, he says that, if his kingdom were like Pilate's kingdom, from the world, then Jesus' followers would fight, but they don't. That's not because there's nothing to fight for; it's because fighting—coercion, violence and all they imply—these are the values and the methods of the world, of human society organized without regard to God. Violence is not a tactic that Jesus rejects—more profoundly, it is part of a vision of life that is fundamentally at odds with what Jesus is saying. With that, we begin to get the picture of what the Lord is talking about. That's the first thing Jesus says about his kingdom.

Then, Jesus says that what it looks like to be a part of this kingdom—what it looks like to buy into his vision, to belong to the truth—is to hear his voice. That's it. Now, to hear Jesus' voice means to make his vision our own. It is to live as if what Jesus has to say is true, and to risk our lives on that truth. It's not so much a matter of following a list of rules or paying a bunch of taxes, as it is with kingdoms from this world (maybe I shouldn't say that during stewardship time.) It's not coercive and it's not about power. It's about listening, and following. It's not as much about what we say we believe as it is about how we center our lives, about whose voice has priority. We enter this kingdom which is not from this world by love, and we live out that love with hope, and with persistence.

Certainly, there is an ultimate and final dimension to Jesus' kingdom. We define that in the Lord's prayer. What does it mean for God's kingdom to come fully? It is for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That's a promise, God will do that; and that promise undergirds our hope. In one way or another, at some time or another, the vision of Jesus will be the vision of all creation.

But at the same time, and in this mean time, in small ways and for fleeting moments, that kingdom which is not from this world can be very real and very present among us here and now. It is among us when the vision of Jesus is lived out, however briefly, in our lives. When love overwhelms fear; when our common humanity rises above our differences; when we are able to reach beyond ourselves in service to a world dying for lack of a vision that is true and life-giving; when we are able to hold, however briefly, to the conviction that the heart of the universe beats with incomprehensible love that undergirds and supports even us, even now, even always—for these moments, the kingdom of Jesus flashes before our eyes, and we know it. Then the world takes over again for a while.

Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, but it belongs in this world. It is not from us, but it belongs within us and among us. It is coming; but it can also be here.