

November 22, 2009

Christ the King Sunday

John 18: 33-38 and Revelation 1: 4b-8

"The irony of the gospel"

Often, I think, we are aware of ironies in life but do we ever consider the irony of the gospel? Of course you are aware of the multiple though related meanings of the word itself so I will point to the particular one of importance this morning: "the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs; an occurrence, result or circumstance notable for such incongruity."

When it comes to the gospel message, it seems that we just plain don't get it so find ourselves with Pilate and the others, trying to grasp what is happening. We, too, despite our sophistication, are asking: "So, *you* are a king?" And in our minds, as surely as was in the mind of Pilate, are the conflicting thoughts of what we are seeing and the expectations we harbor of the perfect king or leader. Doubtful that any of Jesus' ilk would get the nod to be the presidential candidate from any of our political parties and if one did, surely he would not get our vote. In most of our hearts we want a person who is charismatic and powerful. We want a David rather than a Jesus.

Recently a good friend commented that, in her opinion, the whole country had gone crazy! Her somewhat tainted outlook is the result, she admits, to the fascination many of us have with the exploits of celebrities of all shapes, sizes and political persuasions. While countless of our fellow citizens are suffering from the struggling economy, some losing not only incomes but homes, we are caught up in the hype of Oprah's decision to call it quits at the end of twenty-five years and Sarah Palin's new book and who tops the Fortune 500 list and Michelle Obama's new outfit and Hollywood glamour and celebrity status of the rich and famous. Perhaps our enthrallment can be chocked up to desire for a more positive environment as well as more favorable life conditions. Or maybe it's merely our human nature to put some of our sisters and brothers on pedestals in hopes that they will lead us into a more glorious future. On the flip side of the coin, it's hard to say what spurs our interest in apparent connivers the likes of Tom Petters or Bernie Madoff. Could it be desire to see such sinners get there comeuppance and justice to be served? Besides, if I focus attention on them, I don't have to take stock of my own transgressions.

So what ought we to be considering on this Sabbath, the last day of the liturgical year which has been dubbed "Christ the King" or "The Reign of Christ"? If we are indeed thinking about the ebb and flow of life as well as the movement of days, it may be that life's cyclical nature catches us off-guard. Surely the gospel, if we dare admit, does this to us with some regularity. As Jim Rice, editor of *Sojourners* noted: "The week before Advent, the season that celebrates the beginning of Jesus' story, here we are reading about its culmination. It is almost as if the cycles of the liturgical season reflect the words from Revelation: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come.' Jesus is at once the babe soon to arrive in the manger and the crucified redeemer of the world." (*preachingtheWORD*,

Sojourners: Sermon Preparation) But what does it mean to us that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega? Is it as simple as whatever is encompassed between the A and the Z or might his life have deeper meaning? Much as we anticipate the beautiful Advent Season, the swift movement from Jerusalem to Bethlehem tends to take our breaths away. And, truth be told, we'd ever so much more prefer to think about the birth of an innocent child than to stand by one convicted of blasphemy and about to get a death sentence.

Leonard Beechy, a high school English teacher, commenting on today's gospel text, particularly Pilate's question, believes that even though our reasons for asking may differ from his, we, too, ask Jesus "So are you a king?" Beechy goes on to say that the term king is difficult at best. "Then," he writes, "there's the problem of evidence: what is there about the world that suggests it is ruled by someone beneficent and powerful, or by anyone at all? I recall the hush that followed a question from a rabbi to my seminary classmates: "If Jesus was messiah, where is shalom?" (*The Christian Century*, November 17, 2009, p. 20)

The irony of the gospel is that the faithful of Jesus' time were waiting for a messiah who would be like David...strong, opinionated, forceful. Such a one would most definitely not be standing pacifistically and silent. He would be fighting for his life and for the lives of his people. And his followers, rather than denying and hiding, would be rallied into action protecting him at all costs. They would be like modern-day body guards who protect to the point of sacrificing their own lives. Again quoting Leonard Beechy: "If Christ the King Sunday makes us uneasy, perhaps it is because the church has too often made Pilate's mistake. Failing to recognize the supreme revelation of God's love in paradoxical form that stands before us, we look instead for the conventional trappings of lesser powers." (*Ibid.*)

Another irony of the gospel is precisely as the term itself is defined. It is the incongruity between what Christians of every time and place have expected and what actually happens. For instance, it is not at all uncommon for clergy persons to be told that they ought to preach something gentle and soothing like, say, the Beatitudes. Frankly, it would be a lot more pleasant for ministers and priests to prepare and deliver feel-good homilies week after week, ones of prosperity as do some television evangelists. That way there probably would be a lot more happy campers in the pews and perhaps more money in the coffers. For that matter, think of the headaches Jesus might have avoided if only he had said and done what the masses wanted.

But what we want and expect from the gospel and what it truly speaks tend to be miles apart. The message sung by young Mary and lived by her son calls the world to task and turns societies upside down. As former professor of Theology at Bethany Seminary noted: "The clear message is that the coming of Jesus is not to be wholly unrelated to the social and political expectations present in the suffering of Israel. The one whose birth is being announced is to be an agent of radical social change." (*Sojourners Magazine*, June-July 1974)

So...as we stand before Pilate with Jesus, if we dare be so brave, what are our thoughts? Are we, like the Roman governor, wondering who this man is and what he's about? Or do we,

from our vantage point of looking back over the ages, smile a bit smugly because we have the answers? Or, if per chance we're brutally honest with ourselves, might we be asking, however quietly, the same question that Pilate asks: "So you are a king?" then wondering what to make of it all and what to do next?

Verna Dozier, an educator and lay theologian, wrote: "The gospel is a disturbing reminder that our expectation may be a stumbling block to our perception of the reality. One of the most troubling moments in all history is the meeting" we are witnessing today, the meeting of Pilate and Jesus. The powerful governor in his royal robes is completely thrown off guard by Jesus' calm demeanor as we often are when confronted with honesty and humility. Pilate didn't know quite what to do and neither do we.

Although he, in my opinion, most definitely represents the establishment, sometimes I think that Pilate gets a bad rap. I mean, if he was handling such a judicial case in the year 2009, do we really think that the outcome would be much different? It does seem that he gave Jesus the opportunity to defend himself but Jesus opted to remain quiet and finally to speak in riddles.

Jesus said: "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."

Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

And what do we think is truth? What is the truth of the gospel? These are the questions with which we must prepare to wrestle once again as we get our hearts and homes and sanctuaries ready for the coming of the Child. Much as we might like to forget all about the ugliness of the cross, it is essential that we face it with boldness as we seek the truth and promise to embrace it.

John, writing about the revelations made to him on the Isle of Patmos, depicted vividly what he thought the reign of Christ was to be. Again quoting Leonard Beechy: "The apocalyptic imagery of horse, thrones and swords harbors truth in its metaphors, but it should not be allowed to dethrone the Jesus who stood before Pilate in favor of one who looks more like David or Tiberius. If Christ's reign has not yet succeeded in whipping the world into shape, it may be because suffering love has no whip, and drawing all things to itself is slow business. In the meantime, our worship need not enthrone violence and patriarchy, two of the powers that must, in the end, lay down their crowns before the Alpha and the Omega." (*The Christian Century*, November 17, 2009, p. 20)

The liturgical color for this day, as you can see, is white pointing to the purity of our Christ. Its brightness often masks the pain that Jesus and his disciples of every time and place have endured and will do so in the future. So it is that we may find ourselves temporarily unable to move forward. But move forward we will into the Advent season of expectant waiting. The liturgical color which will adorn sanctuaries around the world for the next four weeks is

purple, a hue that signifies both royalty and repentance. It is a color that reminds us that we are to become vulnerable like the Child for whom we await and that we are called to open our souls to the transforming power of the gospel. When we are able to do so in humility and trust, the irony of the gospel will wane and truth will be realized. Amen.