

‘Christ the King’, Year B
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Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37
25 November, 2012

I spent the day in Newham, east London, yesterday—I went with about a dozen Mansfield students to the Aston-Mansfield charity that the College has an historic relationship to. For those of you who don’t know it, Newham is—and long has been—one of the poorest boroughs in London.

While there, I met the Queen’s Representative to Newham, who was delivering a cheque in the amount of £1,500 to help pay for a breakfast club being run by Aston-Mansfield in one of the local schools. It costs £2/child/day to run the breakfast club. Originally, they were asking 30p from each child—but when staff complained that they weren’t being paid (because they weren’t bringing in the money they needed), they decided to raise the cost to 50p/day; more than half the kids dropped out. These are children who then would very likely go to school without breakfast, and many certainly would not get the human connection and attention they received from the carers at the breakfast club.

One of the centre directors confided that he’s been hearing from some of the young people who use their drop-in centre that they suspect there will be a child or young person killed in the next three weeks due to growing gang violence. I was also told that the mayor’s idea for solving the problem of poverty there is to relocate the poor who haven’t paid their rent, or are perceived as a drain on the system, to Liverpool—and replace them with people who will “work, pay, and stay” in Newham. The vicar of the church, who was also at the meeting, said emphatically, “And this is before the cuts have even started to take full effect—some of the people in this neighbourhood have really been looking for jobs for months and months, even longer than a year now.”

These are real human issues, related to real issues of wealth, poverty, of power and authority, and awareness.

Much of the week’s news was devoted to the vote in the Church of England which decided against ordaining women as bishops. There have been all sorts of power issues related to that—the sense that a few people in a few churches opposed to women having authority over them have hijacked the entire church. The question of whether the British government have the power, the right or scope, to tell the CofE to change its mind and pronto. It’s been a wrestling between

religious and state powers. Interestingly, it would appear as though the power of the Church in this instance is the power that society at large is naming as broken at best—possibly even corrupt, or irrelevant.

So, I was walking around east London yesterday, thinking about the fact that today we're going to celebrate Christ the King Sunday, and wondering what "Christ the King" might mean to any of them. If you asked the average person on the street what they think "Christ the King" means, how do you think they'd respond? Do you think it would seem relevant in any way to anything they're experiencing?

I think some people may just dismiss it as an outdated attempt to impose Christian imperialism. Historically, most religions have tried to make out that their God is greater than all other gods. Why would Christianity be any different? Saying that "Christ is the King of all kings" can easily be seen as just another way of trying to claim that the Christians' God is the best god, and all others are inferior. . . it's a not-so-subtle form of exclusivity and triumphalism.

As a Christian, how would *you* answer the question—do you claim Christ as your King? And if so, what do you mean by that?

The word "king" is a political word. And although most kings and queens in the world today are little more than figureheads—or at least, most of them are far, far from the despots that used to occupy thrones—the word still evokes images of tyrants and power-hungry individuals who used and abused the invocation of divine right to do some pretty awful things to other people.

When Pilate asked Jesus at his arraignment, "Are you the king of the Jews?" he wasn't asking a religious question. Pilate was a political person, and he was concerned about his own political power, as well as maintaining the power and order of the Roman government he represented. His question to Jesus was trying to figure out whether Jesus was an insurrectionist threat.

This particular description of the scene between Jesus and Pilate only occurs in John's gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that when Pilate asks the question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds, 'You have said so.' And says nothing more. John alone says that Jesus engages Pilate by asking a question in response: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" When Pilate answers, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" he shows that his notions of power are completely tied up in the politics of church (or temple, in this case) and nation. The power brokers,

as far as Pilate is concerned, are the priestly authorities who are meant to maintain order amongst the Jews, and the authorities of the Roman government.

Jesus responds by pointing out a source of power that has nothing to do with church or state, but that comes from God alone: “My kingdom is not from this world.” Pilate counters, “So you are a king?” And Jesus’s rejoinder indicates the ways in which his understanding of kingship upends that kind of authority or power. He says, “*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.”

It’s interesting that John’s gospel links kingship—a word with worldly notions of power—and truth.

In intellectual terms, we tend to think of truth in terms of reliability and dependableness. In religious terms, however, ‘truth’ expands beyond reliability to become an unwavering conformity with God’s will. Truth, for people of faith, relates to reality and understanding. In the New Testament, it is possible to think of truth as something that is *done* rather than something that is simply *believed* or thought of. It’s possible, in a New Testament understanding, to set truth in contrast to unrighteousness. (Emile M. Towns, FotW)

Emilie Townes, a professor of preaching, asserts, “*The interplay between the more intellectual understanding of truth (which Pilate represents in this passage) and truth as revelation (which we find in Jesus Christ) is an important one to explore for contemporary hearers of the Word. Though important in helping establish and maintain many social norms, intellectual truth does not fill all of our needs. We are compelled to go beyond merely understanding and making sense and order in our world. We must seek to know God and live as active witnesses on this journey into God. Jesus’ life and mission is a model of this for us. In Jesus, we learn that truth is a stimulant for faithful living and witness, rather than only a matter for contemplation. It is something we do.*”

So, in our gospel text, Jesus’ response to Pilate implicitly point out that fundamentally, power comes not from the government or from the religious authorities—his power, and the power that every believer, comes not from a human source, but from God alone. And God’s power precedes human power, and cannot be overcome by it.

Those who are familiar with John’s gospel will remember John lays out the theological landscape at the very beginning of his gospel when he writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-5, 14)

Certainly for the earliest Christians, living under the oppressive rule of Rome, where Caesar was to be the only king, Jesus presents an altogether transformed understanding of kingship. He came as the Prince of Peace, and his reign proclaims and embodies peace, justice, liberation, and above all else, service. This is what his contemporaries—and many people still today—just didn't and still don't understand. It's an indication of how difficult it is to see the world with fresh eyes, to be 'born anew'—in the words of Paul to the Romans, to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

Throughout history and across the pages of scripture, God's covenant is certain. But, as Bruce Epperly points out, "the shape of the covenant and God's ability to reach out to the people depends on their willingness to follow God's moral pathways. God's presence in our lives is relational and contextual, not unilateral and timeless. What we do shapes what God can do in our lives. Violence and injustice threaten our ability to live out the full dimensions of God's vision for our lives and our and our nation." The ways in which we embody the truth that Jesus came to reveal—truth about power and authority, love and transformation—impacts the greater purpose God is seeking in this world.

In his kingship, Jesus gives us the example of one who is not a power-hungry tyrant, no political animal seeking to assert his ego or self. Rather, he is a lover of people and all creation, and a servant witness to the kind of power that reaches out to lift up the downtrodden and oppressed, to those who have not yet recognised the power they have been given by God to know their own loveliness and worth.

Our understanding of divine kingship, if it's tied up with political power that dominates, is all wrong. Political triumph and domination is what the earliest disciples of Jesus expected, until their own understanding was transformed. And I daresay it's still what a lot of Christians hope will happen in the end—that Jesus will return, riding on the clouds, and come to judge the people with mighty power.

But that image needs to be re-fashioned to understand that the mighty power that God rules with is love; and we are also called to judge and live by the power of love. On so many levels, we still seem to struggle with the notion that justice does not require military might in order to prevail. We sometimes think that our voices can make no difference to the political powers and ways that be. But the witness of Jesus standing before Pilate, testifying—*being*—truth to power, should serve to inspire us.

Walking around Newham; and riding the Underground in greater London; and then the Oxford Tube bus on my way back into Wheatley, it occurred to me that there were so many faces, so many people—poor, and middle class, and even wealthy ones—looking drawn and tired, beaten down, in need of a message of hope, of empowerment, of divine love and care. So many people who are desperate for an experience of life and power that derives from a more eternal, loving, transforming place than the governments and human institutions that can elevate some and grind others down with random impunity.

Far from being a celebration of triumphalism, Christ the King Sunday should be a celebration of love in service; a humble observation of our ability to participate in God's designs for love and relationship with all of creation.

Bryn Rees put it this way:

The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed,
God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

Let's sing together hymn number 200. Please stand.