

John 18 28-38

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
Sunday, November 24, 2024

No More of This

This Sunday marks the Feast of Christ the King, also known as the Reign of Christ. Pope Pius XI introduced this observance in 1925, amid the rise of nationalism and fascism in post-World War I Europe. The feast serves to remind Christians that their foremost allegiance is to Jesus Christ, transcending any earthly ruler or nation.

On this of all Sundays, the impostors to whom we have pledged our allegiance are exposed. On the Sunday of our King, Jesus Christ declares the church's independence from every fraudulent lord to whom his children have sold their souls.

C. Clifton Black
Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology
Princeton Theological Seminary

And let's face it, Christians have a long history of selling our souls to fraudulent lords.

Discussing the Reign of Christ is particularly pertinent on the Sunday before Thanksgiving — a holiday that has historically masked the violent injustices committed against Indigenous peoples by Christians intoxicated with imperial power.

In 1637, the official Thanksgiving holiday we know today came into existence. It was not a festive gathering of Indians and Pilgrims, but rather a celebration of the massacre of 700 Pee-kwat men, women and children by English and Dutch mercenaries.

Captain John Mason described the slaughter in these words:

"Thus was God seen crushing the enemies of his people, burning them up in the fire of his wrath and dunging the ground with their flesh. It was the Lord's doings and it was marvelous in our eyes."

When some colonists questioned the morality of the slaughter, saying, "shouldn't Christians have more mercy and compassion?" — Mason responded thus:

"I would refer you to David's wars. Sometimes the Scripture declares that women and children must perish. We had sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings."

In the hands of colonizers, there seems to always be "sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings."

The Bible can be used to justify every kind of violence including genocide. It's been done before. Southern Presbyterians were at the forefront of making a "biblical case for slavery." This is why we must interpret Scripture in the light of Christ who is the true Word of God.

All of this was "baptized" terror. Done in the name of Jesus. The baptism of genocide/stolen land (along with the baptism of slavery) is foundational to understanding our history and plagues us still.

Scripture advises us to "put no confidence in princes" because these princes, whether they are Colonizers in the 17th century or any U.S. president from either party, repeatedly demonstrate their lack of political imagination by putting their confidence in a world founded on power and enforced by violence.

Revolutionary Jesus followers reject the notion that coercive force will change the world. One need only look to the response of Jesus when an impulsive Peter grabs a sword and swings it at the High Priest's servant and cuts off his ear on the night of Jesus' arrest. What does Jesus say to Peter?

"No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Let that sink in for a second. Imagine being there. Those who were arresting Jesus had to be thinking they were after the wrong guy.

"No more of this!" says this King. "This" in that sentence equals violence, weaponry, and coercion. Every other king, it seems, says "More of this!" because every other kingdom is founded on power and enforced by violence. Jesus will have none of it. He breaks into our world in order to announce another way. Jesus invites us to a world founded on an axis of love expressed in forgiveness. In the politics of Jesus, the world will be changed by non-coercive love or not at all.

This is the great clash that is taking place in the text read this morning. Pilate comes with power enforced by violence. Jesus comes with love expressed in forgiveness.

Jesus referred to the cross he would bear as a "judgment" on a world built on power and maintained through violence. This system was embodied by Herod, Pilate, and

Caiaphas, who conspired to put Jesus to death. They viewed him as a blasphemer and a threat to Roman rule, endangering their societal structure founded on power and enforced by violence. Pilate, in particular, recognized the threat Jesus posed, seemingly being the only one actually listening to Jesus' ideas.

Pilate, told that Jesus "claimed to be a king," therefore asks Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" 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."

Important: Jesus is not saying his kingdom is out there somewhere in another space, time or dimension. Another age. He's saying my kingdom doesn't come from this system as you know it. My kingdom doesn't come from the violence of Cain, Pharaoh, and Caesar. It doesn't come from this system, it comes from God.

Jesus goes on to tell Pilate, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate's reply is the cynical reply of a politician, "What is truth?" In the hands of the Corrupt Empire, the truth is simply massaged to fit the agenda.

So, this Sunday is about remembering how God overthrew the verdict of all the courts of the world represented in Pilate. Jesus' followers aspire therefore to embody the politics of Jesus, a new arrangement of human society on an axis of love expressed in forgiveness.

But if you are honest, you doubt this will do much good. I do.

Paraphrasing Nadia Bolz-Weber:

"I mean, if we are going to celebrate a king here today at least it could be one who will wipe out all the racists and those who do violence to women and those who hurt children and everyone who is committed to protecting the rich at the expense of the poor. I want Christ to be a king who can wipe out global terrorists and the people who decided to take 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia' off of Netflix. But, as much as I 'believe' in non-violence, it is simply delusional for me to believe that the only reason I have not taken up arms is anything other than the fact that my privileged, peaceful, educated, high standard of living is procured by violence elsewhere that is safely out of my sight."

But Jesus says, "No more of this!" because this king comes as a savior who knows that more violence will never save us.

We need a different kind of king. One in a cradle. Which is why it's so perfect that Advent follows Reign of Christ Sunday. To remind us before we get any ideas, that this King can never be used to promote an agenda because this is a King like no other.

What is the kingdom of God like? It's like seed being sown. It's like crops as they grow. It's like bread rising. It's like finding a lost coin. It's like finding a hidden treasure. It's like a long walk home. It's like a feast where everyone is welcome. It's like the surprise of water turned to wine. Once we learn to embody that kind of ethos, we no longer have to grasp for Caesar's scepter. It's enough for us to take the hand of our neighbor.

For among Jesus' most radical ideas is this one: To love your neighbor as yourself is a viable political policy.

Amen.