

Solemnity of Christ the King
Daniel 7:13-24; Revelation 1:5-8; John 18:33b-37
Fr. Keith McClellan
Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)
November 25, 2018

What is the best form of government? This question has been raised from the time of the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle to our own times. Plato advocated for a philosopher king who was good at war. Saint Thomas Aquinas believed the ideal ruler is a virtuous king. Communism tried to create a so-called “worker’s paradise.” Nationalism is formed on the premise of an exclusive society of ethnically and culturally homogeneous citizens. ISIS claims to be a caliphate, a state run by a political and religious successor to the prophet Muhammed. Winston Churchill famously said, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” There may be no ideal form of government but, as Pope Francis has said, “Government has a role in addressing inequality and injustice.”

In today’s Gospel passage, Pontius Pilate and Jesus have a conversation about government. However, like so many discussions in the Gospel of John, Jesus and his hearer are at cross-purposes: They use the same vocabulary, but they are meaning different things. Pilate wants to use Jesus to stick it to the Jewish leaders and rabble he has to govern. He taunts them with the idea of Jesus’ kingship. He has Jesus dressed in a purple robe and crowned with thorns. He scoffs at the leaders: “Would you have me crucify your king?” In a final act of dictatorial contempt, he orders that Jesus’ be identified on the cross as “Jesus Christ, King of the Jews”—not in only one language, but in three. Pilate’s questioning of our Lord clearly expresses his understanding of government. To Pilate, a kingdom is of the here and now. It requires a nation of subordinate subjects. It has an army. It uses power and violence as the tools of governance. Because Caesar is his boss, and he cannot tolerate rivals, Pilate hands Jesus over to his executioners.

Jesus never acknowledges that he is a king in Pilate’s sense. Instead, he says, “My kingdom is not from this world.” But this does not mean that he is speaking of a kingdom in heaven, which is the Christian’s natural reaction. Jesus points out that if he ruled an earthly kingdom, his armies would be fighting on his behalf. They

would be using the tools of earthly kingdoms like Rome—namely, war and violence. Jesus stresses that Pilate is the one who has called him a king. Rather, Jesus explains: “I was born and...came into the world to testify to the truth.” And what is that truth? It is what Jesus told Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” and “whoever does what is true comes to the light (3:21). Briefly, the truth is that God is love. Any lie is an attack on truth, and therefore an attack on God.

As we all too graphically see in the world today, truth is suffering and hatred rules. Lying is practiced without shame. Lying is no longer “white” or a slip of the tongue. It is a deliberate practice of achieving and retaining power. Lying and violence go hand in hand. Violent acts and mass killings in schools, synagogues, churches, and hospitals have become everyday news. Worship services, concerts, festivals, softball fields, and study groups have become the venues where hatred is acted out on the innocent. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of Jesus does not live by any kind of violence or coercion. The only violence practiced by Christians is, in the words of newly proclaimed Saint Oscar Romero, is the “violence of love.”

Our human imaginations are dominated by our experience. If we experience violence, we imagine God is violent. Since we humans live by *quid pro quo*, tit for tat, eye for an eye we imagine God also expects us to pray, pay, and obey. We cannot comprehend God’s love or mercy. We see the cross of Christ as an instrument of torture and execution instead of a symbol of self-sacrificing love.

We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. And the end result of that view is death. Although the harsh realities of our world cannot make us absolute pacifists (although some people do have that prophetic vocation), we are called to live by the values of Christ’s kingdom and not the kingdom of deceit, violence and fear. History teaches us that, although some wars may be necessary, no war is a just war. The path of love must be the primary pathway for followers of Jesus.

Prayer is the first step of love. We pray for the perpetrators of the violence even as we do everything we can to disable them, oppose them, and bring them to justice. But as members of the Church and members of a very different kingdom, let us remember these words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

May we choose to be subjects of Jesus, the King of Love. Let us fight darkness with light, and deceit with Truth.