

Christ the King Sunday (B) - Only Our Love - John 18:33-37

Today's Gospel finds Pontius Pilate in a state of utter mystification. A seemingly harmless rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, has been hauled before him as a crucial threat to the existence of the Roman Empire — a rival king — and to Pilate, this makes no sense whatsoever.

Ancient monarchs were very different from those in our own day: Modern queens and kings serve as hereditary symbols of national unity. The king is the country personified, he speaks for the nation and represents the nation, but his power is purely symbolic. This kind of kingship would have sounded ridiculously bizarre to a first-century Roman.

For the Romans, to be king really meant one thing: you have the power to force others to submit to your will. You command armies, wage wars. So, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, Pilate is not asking if Jesus wields symbolic power or will someday inherit a kingship. Instead, Pilate is asking: Do you really have legions of troops at your command? Are you really planning to overthrow the power of Rome?

And Jesus understands the logic of Pilate's question perfectly: He says, "My Kingdom is not of this world." If my kingdom were a *this world* kind of kingdom, my disciples would be staging a jailbreak, a coup, or a bloody riot in the streets, but instead, here I am, alone, powerless, at the mercy of Roman Law... or so it seems.

But Jesus doesn't deny his kingship. Jesus doesn't deny that he *could*, in fact, overthrow the Roman Empire or, for that matter, all the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus is not merely powerful, he is the source of all power, the Alpha and the Omega, God the Son incarnate. But if this is the case, then why did he allow the Romans to arrest him, to beat and humiliate him? Why does he allow the crucifixion to happen at all?

Couldn't Jesus have just shown his infinite power to Pilate and called it a day? For that matter, couldn't Jesus have just transformed every human being into a paragon of goodness and love, avoiding the following 2,000 years of bloodshed, poverty, political wrangling, and robocalls? If so, why didn't he just do it? Why endure the suffering of the crucifixion?

This question gets to the heart of the greatest difficulty about Christianity: If God wants us to be faithful, to be transformed, to do his will on earth as it is in heaven, then why doesn't he do something about it? Why does he speak only in the still, small voice? Why not overwhelm us with his power, make us perfectly ethical, perfectly good, so that evil is forever wiped out from the world?

In answer to this question, Soren Kierkegaard told a story: Once upon a time, there lived a great king. The whole country was his and he held all the power. He could elevate any commoner to a life of wealth and ease or condemn whole cities to destruction with a snap of his fingers. It was the custom of the country that, once every few years, the king would travel through all the land, inspecting every city, town, and village.

It was a great and terrible day when his vast armada of coaches would roar through a village. All the houses would be newly painted, the village hung with garlands of flowers, and all the villagers, decked in their most beautiful garments, would kneel by the sides of the roads all day, awaiting his approach.

While traveling through one village, the king spied a peasant woman out the window of his coach. He bid his driver stop, and the king stood stock still, just staring. Despite her poverty and rough appearance, she was the most noble woman that he had ever seen, and this bachelor king knew that he had found his queen.

The king began to leave the coach to kneel down in the street before her and ask her to be his wife, but he suddenly realized that he was in a pickle; no matter

how she felt about him, she was certain to say yes to his proposal – not because she loved him – but because he could satisfy her every material desire, or destroy her whole village with a word. The king realized that this woman could fear him or seek to gain from him, but that she could never love him, for love is not the product of a bribe or a threat, but is a gift that must be given freely. So, the king shut the carriage door and said, “Drive on!” with the new knowledge that no one would ever love him.

That night, the king had a “eureka” moment! Upon returning to the castle, he went up to his chamber, he took off his heavy golden crown, laid aside his finely made sword, removed his ermine robes, and put on the old potato sack of a beggar.

Taking neither money nor dagger, the king crept out of the castle by night to walk all the way back to the village. His plan was to arrive at the woman’s cottage door helpless, destitute, and hungry. He would beg for shelter, beg for a crust of bread, and eventually open his heart to her, for only in his weakness and poverty could she genuinely fall in love with him.

And so it is with Christ the King. His infinite power and might *could* make us fear him. Christ *could* force us to obey him, but the thing is... God doesn’t want our fear, God doesn’t want our obedience, God only wants our love. Therefore, God the Son sets aside his glory, he sets aside his infinity and eternity, he sets aside all that he is and all that he has, and he comes to us in humility, in poverty: as a helpless baby, as a kind rabbi, as a beaten and humiliated prisoner, so that we can truly fall in love with him. “This is,” said Kierkegaard, “the God as he stands upon the earth, like unto the humblest by the power of his omnipotent love.”¹

If we fall in love with this quiet teacher, this gentle friend, we will not do so coveting his power or fearing his wrath. Instead, he will be our hearts’ delight:

eternal life, the heaven of heavens, will simply be to stand in his presence. To obey him will be our second nature, to rejoice in him will be our constant occupation.

Do you fear God? Fear that he will punish you for your sins? Do you hope to gain something from God? Hope for God's favor in this life? Bliss in the life to come? What if God doesn't care a fig for your fear or your hope of gain, but only wants you to fall in love with him?

What can you do to open your heart to the love of God? To fall deeper in love with Jesus through prayer, through serving your neighbors? Through hearing his word and receiving his sacraments?

Today, Christ the King stands knocking upon the door of your heart. Why not let him in?