

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 22, 2015
Christ the King
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Daniel 7:9-14
Psalm 93
Colossians 1:11-20
John 18:33-37

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate, where Jesus explains to him that he is a king of a different sort, and his kingdom is not “of this world.”

For most of my life I have understood Jesus here as saying that Pilate and those who accuse Jesus have no power or control over him, in spite of their belief to the contrary. Subsequent to our passage Jesus will tell Pilate, “you would have no power over me at all unless God granted it to you.” And earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18).

While there may be truth in this, something else might also be at work here in this conversation with Pilate. Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, and that if it were, he and his followers would use the primary tool that this world provides for establishing and keeping power: *violence*.

But Jesus is not of this world. And so Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus has come to usher in God's kingdom. But he refuses to do so through violence. Jesus will make no disciples by violence.

Instead, Jesus has come to bear witness to the truth. And the truth he reveals is that God is *love*.

This becomes a bit tricky for us. Because we have not seen God and have such a difficult time imagining God, too often our thoughts are dominated by our experience. And so even though God is love, because we live in a world of violence, we imagine God to be violent.

Instead of seeing the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love (which is primarily how John Wesley viewed it), we see it as the mechanism for punishing Jesus in our stead because we have way too much experience with *punitive* relationships. Rather than believe that God's love and grace is unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status only on the condition that we fear and obey God, and despise those who don't.

We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. Then along comes Jesus, who tells Pilate that his followers will not fight for him because to bring the kingdom of God about by violence is to violate the very principles of this kingdom and cause its destruction.

Undoubtedly, after the events last week in Paris, these words of Jesus prompt serious reflection on the part of Christians. Are we to understand Jesus' words as a call to pacifism?

Some traditions within the church have given powerful and vivid testimony to the power of Christian non-violence. Our Mennonite, Quaker, and Brethren brothers and sisters have at times shaken the powers that be, and their witness should not be quickly discarded.

Another part of the tradition, influenced by Martin Luther, would hold that temporal authorities like armies and law enforcement have a critical role to play in creating a more just and humane world. Those who stand in this tradition would argue that terrorists everywhere should be opposed vigorously and brought to justice whenever possible so that there is less such violence in the world.

I have neither the time nor the wisdom to unpack all of this in a 15 minute sermon. However, with your permission, allow me two observations:

First, as members of Christ's church and as followers of a different kind of King, it seems to me that we must come to grips with the fact that there are limits to the reach and outcome of force. We must come to grips with the reality that violence in response to violence simply begets more violence. Martin Luther King was not entirely wrong when he said:

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...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

I'm not speaking here merely with reference to terrorists and terrorism. I'm speaking here of a truth that permeates all of life. I'm speaking as one whose heart and mind is increasingly conflicted. Conflicted because I live in a world that seems so hell-bent on destruction that at times it appears that the only solution to violence is more violence. Conflicted because I know, in my heart, that such is not Jesus' way.

The Jesus of our New Testaments demonstrated power through weakness. He manifested strength through vulnerability. He established justice through mercy. He brought the Kingdom of God to us by embracing a chaotic, confused, and violent world and by taking its pain into his own body, dying the death it sought.

Which leads me to my second observation, an observation based on verse 17 of our epistle lesson where, speaking of Jesus, it says: "he existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together."

It strikes me that on this day where we proclaim Christ as King and we affirm this verse – *that it requires an enormous, gargantuan step of faith to do so.*

In the face of massive evidence in the world that would seem to contradict the statement that Jesus got all of this started and Jesus holds it all together, we gather here on this day and in a bold, audacious, and subversive manner we join our voices together and we say: *he existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.*

We join our voices together today by faith to proclaim that there is more going on in the world than what is going on in the world, and that the vicious cycle that wants to pull us down to destruction has been broken by a different kind of power broker. His name is Jesus. And against all odds, there is still hope for our world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.