

## Last Sunday after Pentecost B 2015 Christ the King, Stewardship Sunday

November 22, 2015

*John 18:33-37*

*Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" 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." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

The last Sunday of the church year is celebrated on our Church calendar as the Feast of Christ the King. Historically speaking, this Feast is a rather recent addition to the Christian Calendar, being established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to growing secularism and nationalism (*Wikipedia*). Today, the Feast of Christ the King holds up a very needed reminder for us Christians that we are ruled not by the principalities and powers of this world (as Bishop O'Neill pointed out last week), but rather by the principles and power of the Kingdom of God so clearly revealed through Christ. For in our lives today, the values of *this* world and our unquestioned trust in ourselves, our group, our wealth, our power, our nation can easily overwhelm and supplant the values of Christ and our trust in **God's** Kingdom. The temptation to put our trust in ourselves and in the instruments and methods of this world is indeed great, for the instruments and methods of this world are all that many people know. And I suspect it has always been so, in every nation, in every time.

It certainly was in Jesus' day! In Matthew's Gospel, when the Wise Men, guided by God's star, come to the worldly and merciless King Herod to inquire where the NEW King of the Jews is to be born, there is no mistaking the theme of the collision of Kingdoms which begins with Jesus' birth and runs throughout Matthew's Gospel: the Kingdom of the Prince of Peace versus the Kingdom of worldly power. We see that same theme in today's reading from John, where Pilate represents the authority and military power of the Roman Empire and Jesus, on the other hand, represents the **vulnerable** Kingdom of the One, True God of our lives.

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus tells Pilate. "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews." In other words, as Professor David Lose points out, "... if Jesus and his followers were of **this** world, they would naturally use the primary *tool* this world provides for establishing and keeping power: violence. But Jesus

is *not* of this world,” and so his followers will **not** fight. Jesus *will* not – indeed, *cannot* – bring forth the Kingdom of God through violence.

However, “Pilate catches none of this distinction between an earthly realm and another reality,” writes Fr. John Shea. “Political men reduce everything to political terms. ‘King’ is Pilate’s word... Jesus, the spiritual man, has another self-designation. He is a witness to the truth. He lives within - and reveals - the ultimate relationship to God and creation. Those who are fixated on political power cannot open to this spiritual depth. But those who **are** aware of the spiritual will hear Jesus’ voice. The truth *they know* will draw them to the truth *he is.*” (p. 276)

My friends, this is one of the reasons it is so important that we support Christ Church. For it is all too easy for us to allow our attention to be fixated not on spiritual things but on worldly things: the imposing 40-foot stones of the Temple that the bishop mentioned last week; the allure of sexting in our high schools; the temptation to solve all our problems by exercising our power and wealth rather than trying to understand, have compassion, and to listen to where others are coming from. Christ Church helps keep the Kingdom of God alive and well amidst the seductive, ego-driven, power-driven kingdoms of this world which wash over us like a tidal wave everywhere we turn. Only if we build our house on a rock can we withstand this unending tidal wave, and the Church holds the blueprints to building one’s house on rock, anchoring our lives in the Kingdom of God – the revelation of ultimate truth to which Jesus says he testifies.

Fr. Shea points to Luke’s story about Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane reacting violently to the soldiers who come to arrest Jesus. “Peter, in a preemptive strike, cuts off the ear of the servant of the High Priest (Luke 22:50-51). Jesus says simply, ‘No more of this,’ and heals the man, restoring his ear. Jesus has spent his entire ministry giving people ears to hear, he is not about to start taking them off now. The **symbolic** import is that the beginning of violence is the end of dialogue. That is why Peter’s sword severs the ear. Combatants can no longer hear one another. Ears have to be restored for dialogue to happen and for violence to end.” (*ibid.*)

The temptation is strong for you and me to **also** react to any perceived threat by cutting off another person’s ear, stopping all listening. Yet, as our bishop pointed out, the true meaning of obedience is “to listen”.

“Jesus refuses the sword of Peter,” continues Fr. Shea... “The world that Jesus comes from relies on **love** as its sole strategy and protection. The wager is that when people *hear* about this love, they will **recognize** it as what they have always wanted... what they have been looking for all along.” For the seed of love is planted deep within us by the God who IS love and who created us in the Divine Image. And Sally Plaster told us last week that Christ Church is a reservoir and transmitter of this divine love.

“...Jesus is not *only* a **revelation** of divine love,” Fr. Shea continues; “he is a mirror to the unknown territory of the human heart. People *know themselves* when they see him...” (*ibid.*, pp. 276-277)

People *know themselves* when they see Christ.

And this is another reason to support Christ Church. For together – through prayer, worship, study, sharing our lives, serving together – we seek to come home to our true identity in God, our True Self, who we *really* are, and to live our lives *from* that space of honesty and vulnerability. For we are *not* our egos, those false selves we have spent so much of our lives constructing in order that we might hide our brokenness and unforgiveness and things we are afraid to reveal, while showing a glittering image to the world. We know our True Selves, who we really are in God, when we see Christ. And Christ Church helps people see Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says he was born and came into this world to be a witness to the **truth**; and together as the body of Christ here in this place we courageously *seek* that truth in both our inner and outer lives. Where else in our society are we challenged to see **God’s** truth? Where else are we taught how to look within our own hearts, question our unconscious motivations, remove the plank from our own eye before we try to take the speck from our neighbor’s eye? Our **culture** surely does not encourage such penetrating, relentless self-honesty.

Where else is the Word of God studied and prayed and proclaimed, week after week – a word that we *never* hear from our culture: forgive 70x7, turn the other cheek, don’t judge, care for the poor and outcast, go the extra mile, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? These Gospel values are totally opposite to our society’s encouragement of retaliation, constant judgment of others, looking out only for ourselves, and *destruction* of our enemies. At Christ Church we hold these competing values up to the light of God’s truth; and Christ our vulnerable king witnesses to that truth.

Last week when he spoke to our Vestry, our bishop told us that he has an adopted son who is black, who lives with his wife in New York City. The bishop’s son tells his father, “Dad, I can’t hail a cab. Nobody will stop for a black man.” The Word of God studied, prayed, and preached here at Christ Church and the Holy Spirit living amongst us and taken within us at Holy Communion week after week reveals how **wrong** this prejudice is, despite the fearful justifications some Americans give that “black men are dangerous.” Here at Christ Church we learn that Jesus *never* taught, “Thou shalt be safe!” and he certainly didn’t **model** “safety” in his own life; he knew quite well what would happen were he to enter Jerusalem that fateful Palm Sunday, and yet he willingly entered anyway – for our sake and the sake of the world.

But listening to some of our politicians today – many of whom are at the same time vehemently advocating to keep the motto “In God we Trust” on our nation’s currency – many of these politicians are preaching the *opposite* of what Jesus taught: they are saying that *safety* is our paramount value, and **no** degree of risk – however miniscule – trumps the value of “safety”. 31 out of the 50 governors of these United States – this “Christian nation” – have declared that their state will not allow any Syrian refugees. And my friends, if we were not a part of this Christ Church community, we might believe such talk is good and moral and right! But we **are** a part of this church, living out our baptismal vows and living into our Christ identity, and we **know** the teaching and example of Jesus and indeed the whole Bible, which puts first and foremost the values of compassion and love and hospitality and welcoming the stranger, recognizing, as the Letter to the Hebrews states, that *we ourselves* are “strangers and exiles on the earth.” (11:13) **These** values of compassion and love and welcoming are the values of the Kingdom of God in which we are called to live and which we are called to reveal to the world and pass on to generations to come.

Which is another reason to support Christ Church: we transmit the Kingdom of God to a new generation which is growing up in a very confusing and disordered world. We teach them God’s love by word and sacrament and example, and we teach them the spirit and characteristics of God’s Kingdom – a Kingdom where it is good to prepare shoeboxes to send to children whom they will never meet but with whom they can form a powerful connection through this act of love and generosity. A Kingdom where it is good to be kind and to forgive and to have compassion and to respect the dignity of every human being, as we promise in our baptism.

One Christian leader (I can’t remember who) once said that the Church is the only voluntary organization of people made up of persons you would not choose to be with. Which is another reason to support Christ Church: it is a **school** for growing in love and understanding and patience and forgiveness. We learn, as our baptismal vow states, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self” – even *and especially* that person we would not *naturally* love and serve. Living in this parish community allows us to put into practice the vows of our baptism and truly seek Christ in that person we would otherwise not even approach. And in practicing this, we might find a miracle occurring: that person whom we thought we could not stand becomes someone we sincerely love!

And in doing so, we find that **we** have not only been transformed *ourselves*, we have *participated* in the transformation of others. We have made a difference in another person’s life. I have seen it happen in this Christ Church community countless times in my 17 years among you. Youth Group members who may be drifting down the wrong path are turned around by the love of this church. Those suffering in many different ways have felt the comfort of this community’s love. A little financial help from time to time has kept individuals as well as families

with young children from being homeless. This community rallied around a single mother of two youth group members who had a stroke, supporting her for months in all sorts of ways until she was able to recover. This community embraced a family from Bulgaria – “refugees”, if you will, from an oppressive system of government. Each of those family members is now contributing their substantial skills to their adopted country, of which they are now citizens. This community has made a real difference in the lives of countless people who were sick, dying, grieving; because that’s what we do, as Sally Plaster shared with us last week. This church donating tens of thousands of dollars to various charities both locally and around the world. This community sending kids to camp and Quest weekends and mission trips which are life-changing. This church providing a place for learning for Montessori pre-schoolers for 40 years, and still providing a place where musicians share their heavenly gifts of music with people throughout this county.

I could go on and on – and so could you. There are countless reasons to support Christ Church generously and sacrificially – reasons which you can identify if you stop for a few minutes and reflect. They all boil down to manifesting the presence and love of Christ in our lives and bringing forth the Kingdom of God in our midst.

My friends, you are a generous parish! You give so very much of your time, talent, and treasure that I am humbled. So I ask only that today you would continue that generosity in making your pledge, increasing it a little if at **all** possible, so that we might be able to meet more of our obligations and expand some of our ministries; while at the same time not feeling guilty if you are *unable* to do so, or if your financial situation **requires** you to *decrease* your pledge. Simply be honest with yourself and with God, and act out of your obvious generosity – that’s all I ask!

We are called to bring forth the Kingdom of God within our hearts and within our community, and in many ways, many of you are already doing this, and will continue to give and give some more toward this goal and calling. I am so very grateful for each of you, and for the privilege of participating as a member of the Body of Christ in this place.

AMEN