

Proper 29, Year B November 26, 2006 Cathedral of St. Paul

Each year, the months of summer and autumn give Christians the chance to hear the stories of Jesus' ministry in the world he called home. Week by week, we listen as he calls his disciples to follow him, challenges his hearers to a new life, proclaims the promise of a new world. We see in our mind's eye the mighty acts by which he announces that God's power has come among us: the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news.

As the year wanes the Church shifts its attention. The celebration of the birth of Christ looms on the horizon, and Advent calls us to prepare to confront the joy and promise of that good news. But every year, before we leave behind the stories of his ministry, we pause to celebrate his reign among us. This is the day; the day when we remember and proclaim, that Christ is indeed King and Lord, known as Christ the King Sunday.

The problem is, what kings and lords usually do is RULE. Both are words, which have to do with power—power over others, power to make things happen. Words like those might make us think of another world, the fantasy world of romance and fairy tales when knights rode off to adventure, slew dragons, and swore allegiance to kings and lords who held the power of life and death over them.

But Jesus certainly has very little to do with kings and lords like those. In fact, the only encounter he ever had with that kind of kingly power cost him his life.

It happened in Jerusalem, a few days after he had ridden into the city to the shouts and cheers of the people. They thought Jesus was the king they were waiting for, and greeted him with the chant that was traditional for greeting royalty: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

But the powers who controlled Jerusalem did not take those cheers lightly. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, confronted this "king" who rode into the city on a donkey. With all the scorn he could muster, he asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Of course, it wasn't a serious question. The only Jewish king Pilate would allow was a puppet, whose authority depended on the empire's permission. Certainly a country carpenter with a gift for attracting attention was no threat to the might of the empire!

"My kingdom" responded Jesus "is not from this world."

Pilate must have been delighted to hear those words; because the only power, which interested Pilate and the Roman Empire, was very much of this world. They had no use for any other kind of power or king. No wonder we hear that Pilate would have let Jesus go. If his kingship is not of this world, he is no threat to Pilate, to Rome, or to anyone.

But Pilate made a very big mistake. He misunderstood Jesus, as many people since have also misunderstood him. He thought Jesus was saying, "My kingdom has nothing to do with this world." But Pilate was wrong.

If Pilate had listened more carefully, he might have caught what Jesus meant: “My kingdom is not FROM this world.” He was not talking about where his authority is exercised, but where it comes from.

Pilate knew where Rome’s power lay. It depended upon a mighty war machine that had taken aim at one people after another, imposing Roman rule and Roman taxes, sweeping away whatever stood in its path.

Jesus, on the other hand, had no such power, and they both knew it. No loyal troops waited outside to guarantee Jesus’ safety. Nothing on earth could save Jesus from Pilate.

The only power Jesus had was God’s power; the only authority behind Jesus’ words was the authority of God; and yet that power is the power of life over death, of love over hate, of justice over the cruelty and barbarism of the cross. He had no earthly power at all, but he spoke in God’s name; he healed and forgave and judged in God’s name. His authority-his kingship-is not derived from any power on earth but from the infinite depths of God’s powerful love.

God’s love is not derived from this world; but it most certainly matters to this world. Pilate misjudged Jesus. Jesus’ kingship really did challenge Rome and continue to challenge every other empire, which presumes to wield power in its own name. Christ the King continues to challenge every person who would lord it over others. That is why those who are in love with power have always feared Jesus and long to destroy his kingdom.

How different is Jesus’ way! What kind of king deliberately rides into a city seated on a donkey, that most unadorned of creatures? What kind of lord acts like the lowliest household servant, kneeling before his friends to wash their feet after a day in the dusty city streets? Jesus was certainly right: his kingship does not come from the world we know and live in.

And yet, the history of humankind through the centuries assures us that kings and empires rise and fall. The arrogance of power brings with it certain ruin in the end, because dominating others—“lording it over” others—means putting ourselves in God’s place, and the end of that road is destruction.

Jesus is a king who does not demand our allegiance, but whose love invites us to follow him. Jesus’ kingship is not laid upon us with a heavy hand that won’t take no for an answer; it is a loving offer to be born again, to start over with new values, new hopes, a new vision of what the human family could become.

Jesus’ kingship is acted out in ministry and service; he is the king who embraces the sick, lifts up the crippled, notices the forgotten, touches a leper, befriends a Samaritan. Such kingship has absolutely nothing to do with wielding power; it is the kingship of love. And that makes all the difference. Jesus and Pilate were both right; such a king does not

belong to the world, but such a king has everything to do with the world; because such a king challenges the world to be and become something it has never been: a home fit for the children of God.

Generations of the people of God have known something of that reign of love, even as they have suffered under the domination of human lords and masters. They have never lost their hope, that one-day—some day—we human beings will learn, and choose to follow a king who prefers donkeys to chariots.

One question is basic: who or what commands your love, rules your heart? Can you say, with full integrity, that no one, no thing, takes precedence over Jesus in your life, in your day-to-day living? What motivates you, moves you, possesses and thrills you from dawn to dusk? Is it some other human person? Is it lust...for power, for recognition, for honors, for glory, for a man or woman, for comfort, for personal satisfaction? What makes you tick? Who or what rules your heart? Something or someone does. Or dreadful thought—perhaps nothing does.

Each of us has a covenant with God and His images—perhaps several covenants; promises that stem from baptism, from religious profession, for ordination, from marriage. They are hard promises. That you will love the Lord with your whole heart, the person next to you as you love yourself; that you will share the poverty of the poor, the blood-soaked obedience of Christ, that you will be a man or woman of the Church, critical perhaps but always from love. That you will be faithful—that others can trust you will never go back on your word.

Long before Jesus appeared among us, the prophet Daniel looked towards a time when God would reign. He dreamed his dream at a moment when the people of God were bent low under the yoke of their oppression, and knew all too well the degree to which some human beings can abuse others. But Daniel foresaw that those powers fade and die, while God's reign is forever. "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed."

And in his vision of the end of all things, the Christian prophet John holds on to the same promise and names the basis of his hope. Power belongs to this world; but "I am the Alpha and Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Pilate thought he understood Jesus; he believed it was safe to ignore him. But he was wrong, Pilate and his power are dust and ashes; Christ's reign is based on God's love, and that love is indeed forever.

Amen.