

Where Are We Coming From?

John 18:33-38 *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world."*

This is the last Sunday of the Christian year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, begins again the cycle of the liturgical seasons. The cycle of the Christian year, which Thomas Merton called the "seasons of the spirit," reminds us as followers of Jesus Christ that we live under a different order. It is the awareness of life as the field of our faithfulness to God, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We live in the world of humanity and human events, but we live according to the living Word and Spirit of God.

The gospel texts for the last Sunday of the church year, which is called "Christ the King" Sunday, deal with ultimate things. Having followed Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection through the preceding seasons, having reflected on the life of the church during the long Season after Pentecost, now comes a time to reflect on ultimate hope. Jesus embodies for us the faithful way of life that is grounded in what is ultimately real, what is ultimately to be accomplished by God for the whole world.

The reading from John's gospel may seem strange to us as we stand at the threshold of Advent and Christmas. It is from the narrative of Jesus' passion and death. Jesus stands before Pilate, having been arrested and turned over to the Roman occupying authorities. Under Roman domination, Jews could not carry out the death penalty. Since the religious authorities were seeking Jesus' death, they had to persuade Pilate that Jesus was aspiring to be "king of Israel." This would be a direct threat to Roman power and authority, punishable by death.

The dialogue between Jesus and Pilate reveals a conflict of two worlds. Pilate's questions and Jesus' answers don't really connect. They seem out of synch, as though they are each talking about different realities. They have two different mindsets. Jesus is in the service of the kingdom of God, the will of God for the life of the world. Pilate is in the service of the world *per se*, without reference to God and God's relationship with the world. It is the "world" that is turned in on itself, the world of power structures, of domination and self-centeredness that creates and sustains poverty and oppression. It is the world that justifies suffering. It is the world symbolized by Iraq, where 120 civilians are killed each day in out of control sectarian violence, a situation created by our habitual and addictive belief that war solves the problem of violence. Pilate is immersed in that world and has not a clue what Jesus is talking about. You almost feel sorry for Pilate when you realize this. He participates in all the power the world offers, even the power over others' lives. And yet he seems incapable of knowing what life is really about. He lives in the world of illusion. All of the things we

sometimes call the "real world," the world of suffering, war, injustice, and so forth, are not the real world at all but the world in rebellion, the world victimized by its own illusions. The real world is the kingdom from which Jesus draws his strength, spirit, and vision. Jesus' kingdom is not "from this world" that Pilate is part of. It is from the God who created and seeks to redeem the world from the destructiveness of human beings who have lost their bearings.

Pilate: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus: "Why do you ask? Because you really want to know? Or because someone has put you up to it?" Jesus is asking about Pilate's motivation. Are you just playing games? Or do you really want to know something, to learn something? Am I just a pawn in your political chess game? Or do you really want to know what I am about?

Pilate: "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own people turned you over to me. What have you done?" Here Pilate seems to get a little more real. Look, I am not a Jew. I don't understand these things, why your own people would turn you in. What's going on? You feel that Pilate is struggling to understand, that he isn't ready to execute Jesus just because the Jewish leadership wants him to do it.

Jesus' answer is a declaration: "My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my disciples would be starting an uprising to liberate me. But my kingdom is not from here." Jesus' life is coming from a different "place," a difference source of meaning, direction, and power. The kingdom of God, according to all the gospels, is the core of Jesus' teachings and his life. It is the realm of God, the reign of God over the world that God created. It is the way the world truly is as the good creation that God continues to heal from the damage of human irresponsibility. Jesus' life is anchored beyond or at the core of the life of the world, in God and God's vision for life. As his followers, we are also to anchor our lives there, to live out of that "other world" which is the true world of life as God made it and seeks to redeem it.

Jesus reminds Pilate that his disciples have not launched a liberation movement on his behalf. Earlier, when the chief priests and Pharisees came to arrest Jesus, Peter had drawn a concealed dagger and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves. Jesus strongly rebuked Peter and told him to put his sword away. Such violence has no part in the ways of God's kingdom. Jesus was not founding a religious movement to be established by force. Oh that Christianity in the centuries after Jesus had only remembered Jesus' command to put away our swords, whether literal or spiritual! Jesus did not bring us a religion to be defended but a life of faith to be lived.

Things finally break down between Jesus and Pilate. "So you ARE a king, aren't you?" Jesus: "You say so. My whole life is about bearing witness to the truth, and everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." The kingdom of God isn't about making us kings. It is about servanthood. No way is Pilate going to get that. The world of politics and

economics and even religion, unfortunately, are most frequently caught up in kingly stuff, getting and holding power, gaining prestige, not servanthood, not being in the service of life.

Jesus' whole life was an expression of the truth of God and our relationship with God and God's world. Jesus fully embodied that relationship and taught it and lived it. He "testified" to it. The word used here is the word from which we get "martyr." He was a "martyr" to this true way of living. The reading from the Revelation to John with which we began our worship this morning describes Jesus as "the faithful witness." The same word is used here. Martyr. Witness. One who testifies with her or his life. That means giving ourselves and our lives to something and for something. It doesn't mean primarily dying for a cause. It means living for a truth, embodying that truth. For us as Christians, Jesus fully embodied the life of a faithful witness. He fully embodied what it means to be a true human being, living from our relationship with God, drawing our life from that "other kingdom" that gives life its truest perspective and its greatest hope.

Jesus is saying that everyone who is trying to live at this deeper level belongs to the truth he is talking about. And since they are living their lives with that kind of seriousness, are giving themselves to life at that level, they know what he is talking about. They recognize his voice. The reading ends on a sad note with Pilate's question: What IS truth? He really doesn't seem to know. Jesus is not talking about an abstract philosophical or theological truth. It is the truth of how we live and what we live for. It is the truth of what it means to be a human being and to live as a true human being. Those who deeply desire to live out of their relationship with God, to live in the world as God's beloved creation, to live with caring and compassion for their fellow human beings and indeed all creatures, these are the ones who listen to Jesus' voice, who know what he is talking about. Pilate is not one of them.

What are the implications of this story for us? Jesus' words, "My kingdom is not from this world," are for us, too. We are called to live our lives out of that reality, that perspective of God's realm, God's dominion over our own lives and the life of the world. It is not wish dreaming. It is not idealism. It is wholly embracing our world as God's creation and living our lives with that awareness and care. It means not getting caught up in the illusory world of Pilate, the illusions of power and prestige and self-centered pursuits.

The story can help us understand why we sometimes feel out of synch with the world around us, the world of war and injustice, the world of seeking status and influence, the world of competition and violence and consumerism. Sometimes our feelings of disconnection make us want to give up on the world, withdraw into our own religious piety, or just sink into cynicism and hopelessness. But Jesus' words are a call to live fully in this world as those who see it as it really is--God's beloved creation that has been

and continues to be messed up by human waywardness. It is a call to live as those who, like Jesus, draw our lives from another place, another perspective, another relationship, what Jesus calls God's kingdom, the world as God made it to be.

Belonging to this truth and listening to Jesus' voice makes what we call the inward journey crucial. Our disciplines of prayer, meditation, reading and study of scripture, reflecting on and understanding more deeply our inner life are the means for helping us keep our perspective. They keep the channel open, as it were, for God's vision of and for life to become more and more the truth of our lives and the truth to which we give our lives.

We sometimes get overwhelmed and discouraged, filled with doubts and fears as we travel this journey of faith. Maybe this is just the way things are. Maybe I'm the one who is out of touch with reality. Maybe all this justice, peace, and compassion stuff is the illusion, just a lot of idealism. All of us suffer from bouts of spiritual depression, losing touch with the essential goodness of our own lives and the world as God's creation. That is when our discipline of prayer, silence, quieting our minds and hearts, study of scripture, and examination of our inner life become critical. These are the ways we retain our connection with God's kingdom and the confidence that this kingdom is not from the world that is so discouraging. It is from God who made the world, pronounced it good, and is always working to redeem it.

On this last Sunday of the church year, may we open our minds and hearts to the widest and deepest perspective--this kingdom that is not from this world but which gives the world and our own lives the greatest meaning and purpose and hope. And may we continue the journeys we are on of living as those who, listening to Jesus, draw our own lives from that same vision of the world as it truly is and is meant to be.