

November 25, 2012 / The Reign of Christ / David L. Edwards

Where Are We Coming From?

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 *To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.*

Psalm 93 *...your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.*

Revelation 1:4-8 *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

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

This is the last Sunday of the Christian year, with Advent beginning next Sunday as the cycle of the liturgical seasons begins anew. Thomas Merton spoke of the “seasons of the spirit” that help us remain mindful as followers of Jesus that we live under a different awareness of reality--life in its relationship to God. We live in the world of humanity, yet by the living Word and Spirit of God, Creator and Sustainer of all life.

Today I included all of the readings from the lectionary. I usually focus on one or two. When we get too wordy in our worship, it is hard to take it all in. Worship is not about filling the mind, but opening the heart, the spirit. Yet, I thought it important today to hear these passages that scholars refer to as *apocalyptic*. It is from the Greek word *apocalupsis*, which means something like “revealing” or, literally, taking the lid off and looking into something. This kind of writing is sprinkled throughout our Bible, and similar writings are found in the literature of other religions. It has to do with peering into the deepest nature of reality, glimpsing the big picture of life's ultimate meaning and purpose and goal. Sometimes life opens up to us in ways that lift the lid off the ordinary, the daily, and we see into the depths. That's what these readings are about.

We heard from the prophet Daniel part of a vision of God's ultimate reign and triumph over oppression. The prophet had been carried into exile in Babylon with his people. They were engaged in a struggle to survive physically and spiritually. The vision is of God whose authority overrides all human power, and of one who would fully manifest God's reign on earth—a king or a messiah, we don't know. This was a message of hope and assurance to the

exiles, and all anywhere who suffer oppression. As bad as things are, they are not the final word.

We heard Psalm 93 speaking of God's reign over the creation being sure and certain, of the earth as established forever, even when everything seems to speak against such assurance.

And we heard from the opening words of the *apocalypse*, or revelation, to John, who was in exile on the island of Patmos, in what was known as Asia Minor. It was a time political and natural turmoil, chaos, and destruction at the end of the first century. The little Jesus communities seemed about to be overwhelmed and extinguished by the conditions surrounding them. The message of the Revelation to John, through all of its vivid and fantastic images and cast of characters, is simple: hang in there. Things may seem overwhelming, but the human regimes that are causing so much suffering and destruction are doomed from the start. Things are not what they seem on the stage of human power-grabbing and violence. Life as God created it to be will ultimately win out, no matter how bad things seem at the moment. God is and was and ever will be in charge. This is the core message of all the apocalyptic writings. It has to do with our seeing at times a glimpse of the deepest truth, that life truly is in God's hands, whether it looks like it or not.

These readings are the backdrop for the dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate in John's gospel. 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, so the religious authorities had to persuade Pilate that Jesus was aspiring to be "king of Israel." This would be a direct threat to Roman control, punishable by death.

The dialogue between Jesus and Pilate contrasts two worlds, two perceptions of reality. Pilate's questions and Jesus' answers don't connect. They are out of synch, coming from two completely different mindsets. Jesus sees everything in its relationship to God's kingdom, or realm, the will of God for the life of the world. Pilate is in the service of the world *per se*, without reference beyond the one-dimensional world that creates and sustains power and wealth for some, poverty and suffering for others. Pilate is immersed in that world, and has no clue what Jesus is talking about. He participates in all the power the world offers, 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 caught in 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

One who created and seeks to redeem the world from the destructiveness of human beings who have lost their bearings, and to do that through love.

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?” 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 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 religious leadership wants him to do it.

Jesus: “My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my disciples would be up in arms to liberate me. But my kingdom is not from here.” Jesus is coming from a different “place,” a different frame 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 at the deepest core of 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 or made dominant, but a life of faith and love 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, dominating others, 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 describes Jesus as "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, not primarily dying for a cause. It means living for a truth, embodying that truth as best we can. 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 true human being. When we are deeply desiring to live out of awareness of the sacred dimension of the world, to live with caring and compassion for our fellow human beings and indeed all creatures, we are the ones who listen to Jesus' voice, who know what he is talking about.

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 Pilate represents, 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—the world of Black Friday! 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.

On this last Sunday of the church year, may we open our minds and hearts to the widest and deepest perspective—this kingdom, this way of living 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.