

“The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory”

John 18:33-37

Among his many unsuccessful bids for public office including a run for the Senate and two for President, once as a Democrat and once as a Republican, in 1991 David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Louisiana Klu Klux Klan, lost the campaign to become Governor of the state. Shortly thereafter, he was interviewed by Dan Rather on CBS. I remember watching that interview and being surprised as how articulate he was. David Duke represented a new breed of the KKK, appearing in a suit and tie instead of a white robe and coming across as intelligent and thoughtful, as a person with convictions. He didn't sound like a racist. In fact he said a lot of things that a lot of people would resonate with. Which is perhaps why he was considered to be so dangerous by so many people.

Among the many statements he made that sounded mainstream was this one: “This is a Christian country.” Nothing radical about that statement. Many others have made it. Maybe we have said it ourselves. It is a comfortable sentiment, especially if you happen to be Christian. It is one of those statements that sounds both patriotic and spiritual at the same time. But to hear it coming out of the mouth of a racist like David Duke makes one sit up and take notice. It makes one think that the statement should be examined a little more closely.

What does it mean to say that this country is a Christian country? If we mean that Christianity is the dominant religion of the United States, well then it is obviously true. If we mean that many of the ideals embraced by our country are compatible with or even influenced by the Christian faith, then that is probably true also. If we mean that at least some of the founders of our country were Christian people, then again, that also is true.

But as I watched that interview I had the feeling that David Duke was saying a lot more than that. I had the feeling that when he said this was a Christian country he meant that those who were not Christian didn't really belong. That it was our country, not theirs. I must not have been the only one to think that because Dan Rather pressed him on that statement. What would it mean for a Jewish person to hear him say that? As I recall, David Duke said something to the effect that Jewish people had a right to live here, but that it would be better if they would become Christians. I found that quite disturbing.

To be fair, there are a lot of Christian people who are not racists who believe that it is their duty to witness to their faith and to try to convert people of other faiths to Christianity. That is a common enough sentiment. But that is different from someone running for public office implying that people who belong to a faith other than Christianity would be better Americans, better citizens, if they were Christian.

“This is a Christian country,” he said. It makes me think that we should be careful about assenting to statements that on the surface sound true, because they may take us to places we would rather not go when we follow them to their logical conclusions, and they may put us in company we would rather not keep.

I raise all of this because today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent and the start of a new liturgical year. The church ends the year on a bright note – the affirmation that Christ is King. King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, as we hear in Handel's *Messiah*.

The Gospel reading for this Sunday takes us to the *praetorium*, the headquarters of the Roman Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, where they have brought in Jesus for him to question.

This image of Jesus standing before Pilate is very provocative. Here is Pilate the Roman Procurator representing the state, the Roman Empire, representing Caesar and all the might and power of Rome. Pilate had been appointed as *praefectus* or governor over Judea in the year 26 AD by the Roman emperor Tiberius. He ruled with an iron fist over every aspect of the province—the military, the courts, the economy, and even the Jewish Temple (pilfering its funds to build an aqueduct). According to the Jewish historian Philo, Pilate was a ruthless overlord: "by nature rigid and stubbornly harsh. . . of spiteful disposition and an exceeding wrathful man. . . the bribes, the acts of violence, the outrages, the cases of spiteful treatment, the constant murders without trial, the ceaseless and most grievous brutality."¹

And here is Jesus, the carpenter, a tradesman, a peasant turned preacher, brought to Pilate by his own countrymen to be tried and executed. Pilate's chief concern was to decide whether or not Jesus represented a political threat to the *Pax Romana*, to the stability and order that he was charged with maintaining in his region. Was Jesus, as his accusers alleged, a threat to the established government? Was he seditious?

I guess it depends upon how you look at it. In one way of looking at it, you could say that Jesus was just a spiritual teacher who encouraged his followers to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile. He told stories about women in the kitchen and farmers in their fields and a wayward son returning home to the welcoming arms of his father. He talked about the beauty of lilies and how God cared even about a sparrow that fell to the ground. What could possibly be threatening about such a man as that?

When Pilate asked him if he was the King of the Jews, Jesus answered by saying: "My kingdom is not from this world." As Reinhold Niebuhr points out in a sermon on this text, "Jesus' answer must have quieted Pilate's fears immediately....With that assurance Pilate relaxed. All the Pilates and Caesars of the world have been relieved by similar assurances. The Kingdom of God, the kingdom of truth, is not of this world. Therefore the kingdoms of the world need not fear it. Its servants do not fight. They do not set power against power."²

If Pilate had only had a crystal ball and could have foreseen the outcome of his actions, he might not have felt so relieved. The kingdom that Pilate represented would one day become a Christian empire. He couldn't have imagined that. Nor could he have foreseen that followers of Jesus in the intervening years would choose to be burned alive or torn apart by wild beasts rather than to curse the name of the man standing before him now. Nor that the institution of slavery that was an integral part of the kingdom he represented would one distant day be demolished mostly by people who claimed this man as their Lord.

Niebuhr points out that Pilate may have had a false sense of security upon hearing Jesus say that his kingdom was not of this world. "The only kingdom which can defy and conquer the world is one which is not of this world," he says.³

So this visual image of Jesus and Pilate squaring off is very provocative, even before anything is said. Then you add the dialogue provided by this Gospel writer and it becomes even more so. Pilate seems agitated, confused, wavering, not at all sure that he should be condemning this man to death. Jesus appears subdued, serene, calm. "Are you the King of the Jews?" "My kingship is not of the world...." "So you are a king." "You say that I am a king."

And it is all right there. There is a power that resides in governments and in rulers and there is another kind of power that is found in conviction, integrity, truth and righteousness, a power that ultimately comes from God. And they are altogether in two different realms.

Christian people down through the ages have found it important to be able to make a distinction between these two kinds of power, between the kingdoms of the earth and the Kingdom of God. The distinction is evident right here in this text for today. It is highlighted again prominently in the book of Revelation, written during a period of intense persecution of the church, when the author affirms that Christ is “ruler of the Kings of the earth.” It is seen in the Lord’s Prayer that we pray each Sunday. The ending of that prayer, most scholars agree, was added later when the church was being persecuted, and they made this statement of faith: “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.”

In more recent times it is found in one of the Confessions found in our Book of Confessions. You may have noticed when we had all of the banners here for Reformation Sunday that one of them had a swastika on it that was crossed out. That banner represented the Declaration of Barmen that came out of the Confessing Churches in Germany during the time of Hitler and the Nazi party. The Confessing Churches took a bold and unpopular stand in those troubled times in Germany, reaffirming the distinction between earthly powers and the Kingdom of God. The writers of that confession were saying that their ultimate allegiance belonged to Christ and not to the Fuehrer.

In the history of Christianity the Christian religion has had just about every conceivable relationship with governments, all the way from being an enemy of the state and enduring persecution, to being sanctioned by the state, proclaimed the official religion, supported by state money and given a favored status over other religions. When you look back over the 2,000 years of the church what you find is that whichever way it goes, the relationship of the church to the government is almost always a precarious one. There is an obvious problem when the church is being persecuted. Less obvious, but just as real, is the problem when the church is sponsored by the state. A case could be made that it is during those times of persecution that the church has remained strong and vibrant, and that during times when the church had the benefit of the support of the government that it became complacent and weak. “This is a Christian country,” says David Duke. And I wondered what he meant by that.

I have to say that I was rather disappointed when at President Obama’s inauguration Rick Warren, the well-known evangelical pastor, offered a prayer and ended it by trying to lead that vast public gathering in the Lord’s Prayer. I have a certain amount of respect for Rick Warren in that he has helped to broaden the evangelical agenda and helped to take it beyond it’s formerly rather narrow focus. But at the inauguration of the President of the United States to try to lead people of various faiths in a distinctly Christian prayer was, I thought, very insensitive and inappropriate.

I am a Christian and I am an American and I hold both of those loyalties dear. But at least for me, I am of the conviction that they are not identical loyalties but separate and distinct. All human systems of government stand under the judgment of God and none is synonymous with the Kingdom that Jesus spoke of when he stood before Pilate long ago, none represents or is equal to the Kingdom of God.

¹ *Reflections* By Dan Clendenin at journeywithJesus.net

² *Beyond Tragedy*, Religion on Line

³ *Ibid.*