

John 18:33-37 Bill Uetricht 11.20.24 Christ the King

Some of you might be old enough to remember the television show “Get Smart.” In some ways, this show introduced us to the cell phone. Before any of us ever thought about carrying our phone with us, Maxwell Smart had his own personal phone in the form of a shoe phone. Maxwell would take off his shoe and start talking on it. It was this reality that gave me the inspiration, when I was playing with our boys or our grandson, to take one of their feet and place it up to their ear, pretending that they were wanted on line one. And then I would say, “No, they want you on line two,” drawing their other foot to their other ear.

But this is not why I mention Maxwell Smart. There was a scene from one of the episodes of “Get Smart” in which the villain was tricked by a loaded cigarette and blown off a cliff, resulting in his death on the rocks below. Secret Agent 99, another character in the show, watches in horror, and then offers this commentary: “You know, Max, sometimes I think we are no better than they are, the way we murder and kill and destroy people.” Then Maxwell Smart responds: “Why 99, you know we have to murder and kill and destroy in order to preserve everything that’s good in the world.”

Well, that is some interesting thinking, yet in some ways, some very common thinking. It’s the kind of thinking that often runs the world, the kind of thinking that suggests that this is just the way the world is. Violence...it’s just the way life has to be. Intimidation...it’s just the way the world functions. Retaliation...well, it’s just the way you have to operate in the world. We call this approach to life the kingdom of this world. Almost all of this know this kingdom. Most of us live in it much of the time, but some of us are particularly preoccupied with it. For some of us, it is the only truth we know.

I suspect that Pilate is a representative of someone who lives fully in the kingdoms of this world. Pilate represents the Roman establishment. And that establishment embodies the kingdom of this world better than just about anyone...except maybe Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Mussolini, Kim Jong and other leaders throughout our current world. For this system, life is all about power, getting it, maintaining it.

Well, in steps Jesus, the one we call the Christ, the king. This one represents a whole different system, another kingdom, another world.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate, the representative of the kingdoms of this world, asks Jesus. “Are you the boss man? Are you the one in charge? Are you the one who controls these folks?” Often those who run things don’t know any other way than the way of control. Pilate concludes that Jesus must be in charge, just like he is in charge.

And what’s more, those who run things are threatened by others who are thought to be people of power, which is what Jesus obviously was thought to be. To call him “king of the Jews” is to view him as a threat. And honestly, he will be killed because he was a threat.

But you will notice that when Jesus is asked if he is indeed a king, he doesn’t answer the question directly. The only answer that he gives is, “You say that I am.” I guess, Pilate, if you need me to be the king, I am. You don’t know anything but power, control, and intimidation. So, in what other way can you view me? Power is always the lens by which you see life.

But Pilate, you’ve got to understand. I live in a whole different world. “My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my followers would pull out the big guns. They would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders.

Jesus is saying that his way is not the way of violence. It is not the way of *his* kingdom. Now I will let you discuss what that might have

meant for dealing with the evil Hitler in World War II or what it means for dealing with the evil Putin, who has masterminded the invasion of Ukraine. I am not ready to say that violence is always wrong. But I am ready to say that the way of Jesus is not primarily the way of violence. No, you don't have to murder, kill, and destroy in order to preserve everything that's good in the world. In fact, avoiding violence may be a chief means to preserve the good in the world. I like what Martin Luther King says about violence:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing that it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil it multiplies it. Violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Look at what has happened in Israel and Palestine. Hamas killed over 1100 people. And Israel retaliated by killed 40,000. And then Hezbollah and other groups reacted by killing more. The spiral never stops. To operate as the kings and kingdoms of this world operate is often to get just more of the same. Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. Revenge begets more revenge. Intimidation begets more intimidation. Fear begets more fear. Power mongering begets more power mongering.

Yet the way of Jesus, the king, takes us to another place, another way of thinking, another way of operating. And this is what we remember on Christ the King Sunday. And honestly, this way may make us strange in the world because the world won't get the world as it is found in Jesus. Even his followers often don't get it. Our eyes are so shaped by the way the kings and kingdoms of this world operate that

we have a hard time seeing anything else, which explains why portions of Christianity today represent not an alternative way of being in the world, but an attempt to gain, secure, and maintain power so that the world reflects what they want.

The early Christian movement was a minority movement that saw itself not as the primary power force in the world. No, it saw itself as one that challenged the claims of the emperor and the empire. Its earliest creed probably was “Jesus is Lord.” The word “Lord” was the title given to the emperor. To claim that Jesus is Lord is to make it clear that Caesar is not. For Christians, the world doesn’t operate on the basis of the love of power, but on the basis of the power of love. That is the strangeness that we live into.

Our second reading from the strange book of Revelation offers grace and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come (in other words, the one who really matters), and from Jesus Christ who is said to be the ruler of the kings of the earth. The recipients of the book of Revelation are dealing with the emperor who is demanding that he be worshiped as the one who truly is in charge. And Revelation is reminding its readers that the emperor is living an illusion. He is not the king of the earth. Jesus is. Power doesn’t rule; love does. Those who follow Jesus operate not the basis of the love of power, but the power of love.

It’s interesting to take note of a couple of the other titles given to Jesus besides “the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is said also to be “the faithful witness” and “the firstborn of the dead.” The Greek word for “faithful witness” is one we would translate “martyr,” one who suffers because of faithfulness. The one who is in charge is one who suffers, one who endures a death that he doesn’t deserve. What rules life, Christians believe, is suffering love. What rules life is not a power that wants to boss people around. No! What rules life is a love that is

willing to get dirty with life's pain and suffering. Emperors often stand at a distance from real life and real people. Jesus doesn't.

Jesus is a faithful witness. And he also is the firstborn from the dead, which is to say that the one who went the way of the cross is the one whom God raised from the dead. He was the first to be raised. We will follow. Suffering love is what God exalts. Suffering love is what rules the universe. Jesus, the lamb that was slain, is king.

And if Christ is king, Christ is Lord, then, as Richard Rohr says, Caesar or any political leader is not. If Christ is king, then the economy and stock market are not. If Christ is king, then my possessions, my country, my job are not. If Christ is Lord, king, then I am not.

It's a whole new, strange world, when Christ is king. It is a world that turns our world upside down. And while that truth probably will challenge us to the core, it may actually take us to a much more interesting, less anxious, less fearful, more welcoming, more loving world. It may give us, as John would put it, eternal life, life that really matters.