

November 22, 2009

**Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Christ the King Sunday)**

John 18:33-37

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Last Spring I was with a small group of teenagers, who were in preparation for Confirmation. We spent a good amount of time together over the course of several Sunday afternoons and it was our last time together before their confirmation. I asked them some questions, in order to get a pulse on what they thought of Sunday School, what they thought of our class together, what their time was like in other Christian groups and even how they relate to other Christians in their world, in their schools, groups, cliques, and so forth. This group consisted of teens that were, let's say, irregular about the attendance on Sundays. But, that does not mean they were not struggling with questions of faith. As I pushed the conversation a little further, pressing them about their experiences here and in other Christian groups, one of them said something that is still sitting with me today, six months later. He said that he and others like him were looking for a more authentic Christian experience. More authentic.

In today's Gospel we have the exchange between Pilate and Jesus, and naturally, when we read this tend to put emphasis on Jesus and his Kingship. In fact, today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, also known as the Sunday of Christ the King. Therefore, we can see why we have the particular passage from Revelation, why we wind up with the collect, "Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords..." and why this Gospel was selected. Our worship today, reminds us of where our allegiance is supposed to lie. We are subjects of no one else but Christ. Therefore, is natural today to focus on Jesus when we read this passage. But what about Pilate?

A church historian once noted a certain irony about the Christian confession. He pointed out that in the Christian message, of all the famous ancient Romans — Julius Caesar or Cicero or Vergil — none has achieved nearly the universal name recognition as Pontius Pilate. An otherwise obscure provincial governor, Pilate, with the Virgin Mary, and with no other human creature, has his name, recited every day all over the world in our Creeds. "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..." It is easy, when we point at Pilate, to separate ourselves from him.

However, if we look closely at this passage, at what is going on in the story, maybe we can identify a little with him. Pilate on one level views himself as a very important man. He is the most powerful man in Jerusalem, representing the great hyper power in the world, at that time. He reveals this view about himself in dialog prior to what we hear today, saying, "Do you know I have the power to release you and to crucify you."

On another level, Pilate is trapped. He is stuck in an outpost, in a spot that is not exactly the epicenter of the Roman empire. He has to maintain order over a group of Jewish people he does not like. Representatives from these people pose him with a problem, they claim Jesus is calling himself King, is not loyal to the empire and by Roman law must be killed. What can Pilate do? If he ignores those over whom he has control, for the sake of showing them who is boss, he risks losing order over those very people, perhaps risks being removed by his superiors at home, which put him there to keep order. If he does what his subjects want, he acknowledges he does not have complete control over them (the tail that wags the dog). What is really driving this trial of Jesus? Does Pilate think Jesus is guilty, or is he trying to keep control? Perhaps Pilate cannot bring himself to acknowledge the truth in front of him, or the reality of what is churning inside him.

Perhaps there is a little Pilate in us too. Maybe we feel trapped between the life we live and the one we want. Maybe we feel stuck, trying to move from who we are, to who we are created to be. Maybe we do not feel completely free to live as if Christ were really our King. What's holding us back? Maybe it is a fear of losing our livelihoods, losing our way of life, which keeps us quiet, keeps us going along to get along. Maybe a possible loss of status, or relevance in certain groups, quiets us. Perhaps it is a fear of risking relationships, losing people we care about if we reveal what we really see, if we say how we really feel about our faith, about how faith informs our lives, and how it informs what we see happening before our eyes on a daily basis. Perhaps it is the overwhelming feeling that we cannot make a difference, a sense of being alone in trying to bring about change and so we throw up our hands and check out, we go quietly and stay in control of the smaller things we can control.

Then what happens? Perhaps we lose that authenticity that is so important to our faith. The voice of Christ, which stirs in us, in response to the many injustices we see, falls silent. The voice that seeks to shape our relationships grows silent. I think that silence is what some of our youth may see. I think that silence is what many seekers see. I am not referring to All Saints' in particular, but to the church catholic. Many seeking God in Christ see and sense a disconnect between what we say, and how we interact with each other and the wider world.

But there is another side to this coin. Jesus, right up to the very end gives Pilate a chance, an opportunity to take stock and see where Pilate stands and to see truth. Jesus gives Pilate the opportunity to speak the truth of Pilate's own life, to see the traps and to recognize the truth in their present moment together. This same invitation remains for us all even now. It is more than an invitation to take stock of our lives. It is an opportunity to participate in something greater than self. It is the opportunity to participate in the community of believers, the Body of Christ, where we are nurtured and restored by the Holy Spirit. If we allow the work of the Spirit, if we embrace the Body of Christ, we can be changed through prayer,

through fellowship, through formation, and a host of different ministries and opportunities right in front of us.

Yes it is a bigger commitment for many who already have busy lives; but something happens when we embrace that commitment. When we make that choice, we become free.

Free to make choices about vocation we may never have considered before. Free to stand up and name injustices when we see them, without fear, knowing we have the support of community to lift us up when others knock us down. We are free to leave the traps that have held us back for so long, knowing that we have the support of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are free to build relationships based on love and respect; free to live more in the way we were created to live. No one has a perfect life. But, we can choose a life of integrity and authenticity. This is the very life that so many are searching for, if we will only help show the way.

We are about to have our youth from the Rite 13 group stand and acknowledge the changes that are happening in their lives, as they transition to adulthood. In this liturgy, we promise to uphold them in this transition, supporting them with our experience, knowledge and our love. They and many others need us to bear witness to the love of Christ by word and example. We need them to challenge us, question us and even teach us a thing or two about faith unhindered by the adult experiences that can cloud our way. Together, we can provide that authentic life of faith for the young and old in our community, and give reality to the words, Christ the King.