

Reading John 18: 33-37. An Alternative Kingdom

In the Christian calendar today is *Christ the King Sunday*, always the last of the liturgical year. In the reading from the Gospel of John we are encouraged to imagine, to embrace an image of this kingdom.

The '*kingdom of God*', according to John, might be called the '*reign of truth*' and it stretches forth from the creation of all things to the consummation of all things; the alpha and the omega. A holistic poetic metaphor, one that is meant to stretch us beyond all that is knowable to the mystery we call God.

Alpha and Omega - Awesome, uplifting and, and... there are no words that can encapsulate it; but just for a moment we are invited to try to connect with that immensity. I find it helps to breath it in, ...all that is and all beyond that, is where, in God, we live, and move and have our being. Just for a moment breathe it in, all in all, beyond words, beyond thoughts, breathe...

For me there is a deep centring in that kind of breath prayer, a heavenly connection you might say. It's peaceful and practical, but I can't stay there all day like an aesthetic monk, even so there are often glimpses of it throughout the day, at the sink, at the desk, in the garden, in the eyes of another, or wherever. I personally don't want to stay there all the time, because there is more than the awesome beginning and ending of mystery in the Christian practice, there is the core, the place where much of life's happenings occur. The core isn't really separate or distinct from the mystical all in all, I explain it as the human project of it, the organic messy reality of our existence, where I at least spend most of the time, earth grounded. I think though that the connection, of the heavenly and the earthly, is very closely associated with the 'truth' Jesus refers to in his conversation with Pilate.

Let's set the scene of that conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Jesus has been arrested in the garden, passed on from Annas, last year's high priest, to his son-in-law Caiaphas, the current high priest. He's been questioned about his teaching and it seems none of the leaders know what to do with Jesus confident honesty, so they send him on to Pilate; making it clear, that even though Jesus is a religious threat, their purity laws can't cope with killing someone so close to the Passover festival. So, when they pass him on, they emphasise the political threat that this kind of honest teaching can be. A very real threat as we see when we follow the history of the early church that sprouts communities with loyalty to Christ rather than loyalty to Caesar.

Pilate seems somewhat reluctant to enter the dispute, but the leaders make him aware of his duty to protect the state against such a political threat as this. That's the scene; religious leaders bound by purity laws but hoping to be rid of this niggling nuisance who is causing some in their community to question the status quo; a state official who appears reluctant to act against someone who seems to have great integrity but clearly has powerful people against him; a city filled with festival participants, who as we know from the Arab spring ten years ago, might rise up in the blink of an eye under the right conditions; All this messy earthy reality. And all the time this is happening, Jesus close friend Peter, has been denying he has any association with him, cowardly but understandable when we know where the story goes. This could have been happening in the Middle East today, it could be happening anywhere today.

So, Jesus is alone, kind of, physically anyway, and that's the scene of John's record of a brief inconclusive exchange, built around Pilate's four questions to Jesus. Jesus first response is in probing Pilate's motive; is it genuine curiosity or routine prosecution? Then he speaks of his kingdom, but perplexingly, so as to disregard Pilate's categories and assert his own. Lastly, Jesus points out that truth is the heart of his kingdom, not power; by this statement, Jesus turns the tables and challenges Pilate, whose only response is to ask that timeless question, what is truth?

So where does all that lead us, we have a kingdom, a political term, however one that is not of this world, we have a kingdom that is somehow related to the messiness of Jesus current circumstances though; and we have truth, that force that seems to have gotten Jesus into this mess in the first place.

If we look at the notion of Christ as king, even just in these few passages, we see a king who responds to violence with peace, nowadays it's called non-violence – he responds with a willingness to engage honestly with his accusers, he responds with courage in continuing to build relationship through dialogue and importantly to treat the aggressor as human not as beast. We see one who asks questions seeking understanding, we see one who answers with integrity and respect for the other, we see one who focuses on the big issues, and who, in doing so, treats those who are trying so hard to pull him into their violence trap, with dignity and humanity.

There is no blame, no aggression, and no political one-upmanship; if this is what a kingdom looks like it's got nothing to do with power and privilege and everything to do with relationship, equality, justice and mercy. It's got everything to do with enabling life to flourish and in denying the protective need to respond in violence. But that doesn't mean this kingdom isn't political, it clearly is, given the setting, but it is an alternative polity, a polity of justice and peace, a polity of truth.

Pilate's understanding of kingdom however is grounded in violence, one not that different to what we see in the world today, it's a kingdom with boundaries built on some form of agreement and enforced through relationships of power and influence. It's like so many conflicts we see on the news every night, those in which the powers of violence horrify us, in the middle east, in some African nations and most concerning now in the USA. Conflicts are not only national; they can be very personal. In 2017, almost half a million people across the world were killed in homicides, far surpassing the 89,000 people killed in active armed conflicts and the 19,000 killed in terrorist attacks. This too is a horrifying political issue, reminding us that so much violence is close at hand and not in some far-off war.

The powers of the world, including ours, refuse to take a stand on many horrifying issues, this refusal, to stand up for justice and peace often occurs because it will come at a cost, no doubt a great cost to those with political wealth. Reflecting on this reality we might further understand Peter's cowardly response, but his response is not the kingdom response Jesus presents. It is not the alternative polity, the alternative worldview that Jesus calls for.

There is much complexity in considering the relationships and agreements among world powers today, I get overwhelmed with the onslaught of information, and sometimes I even question whose views I can trust, wondering, what is the truth behind all this?

Wiser people than I are failing to come up with helpful answers, and I wonder whether there are any answers to come up with or whether in some way what Jesus teaches about truth is that it's not so much about the answers as much as it's about the eternal question; A question that needs to be grappled with over and over again as we face the reality of life in all its violence and messiness.

Death and destruction in physical war is horrifying, but is the destruction of life through the lifestyle choices we might make any less horrifying? Just because we don't see it on the news every day, we still know that our economic decisions, from where and how we shop, to where and how we invest our dollars, these decisions have power and influence in the world. Most of us can't and don't want to imagine what it would be like to live with the threat of homicide in our streets. But maybe we can and do want to imagine that our choices are making a difference, if we can imagine it, then we can embrace it, and if we embrace it we can choose to live in it, live in the kingdom in which life can flourish and truth can reign.

In a little while we will pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", this is a political statement, it is an acceptance by us of the truth Christ offers, the communion of life, the peace and justice that springs from a worldview of truth that is hard to explain and sometimes just needs to be breathed in and out.

We don't have to lay the path of non-violence; it's already been set before us. I don't think anyone suggests it's easy, it takes courage, integrity, passion and commitment, we will need to be prepared to be vulnerable, like he was, we will probably at times suffer, but not anything like he did, a few of our friends may desert us, and sometimes we will desert them. But the amazing thing is we always have an option, a choice to turn around, a choice to reset our worldview and embrace the non-violent king who has set the path of peace for us.

This is not beyond us, the awesome alpha and omega, the mystical all in all beyond our understanding, this is not beyond us because we have the core, the link that draws heaven and earth into one existence, the 'truth' of communion with all of life in our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who not only paves the way, but who is also willing to travel the journey with us, and before us, the journey to life in all its fullness; The journey of Truth.

Rev Dr. Kerry Pierce