

## **“CITIZENS OF TWO KINGDOMS”**

*John 13:33-37*

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In this morning’s Scripture reading, Jesus is standing before Pilate, and Pilate asks him if he is the king of the Jews. Pilate has to ask, because Jesus certainly doesn’t look like a king. We all know what kings look like — the youngest child among us can tell us that kings wear long, fancy robes, have crowns on their heads, and have a lot of power — sometimes too much power. Every year *Parade* magazine does a story on the ten worst rulers in the world today — kings and dictators who hold absolute power over their people and who violate human rights on a regular basis. Jesus hardly looks or acts like a king, with his ragged robe and his crown made, not of gold and jewels, but of thorns. Jesus doesn’t appear to have any power at all. He can’t even get his disciples to behave the way they ought to — and he doesn’t seem to be a threat to anybody. Yet the nervous Pilate doesn’t want to take any chances. So he interrogates Jesus, hoping to discern whether or not this man is a political threat, possibly guilty of treason, for which the punishment is death.

“Are you a king?” Pilate asks. Just the word “king” brings images to all our minds. We may think of knights and medieval castles or we may think more of the fantasy world of Disney or even of Burger King, but we can all relate to the word “king.” The Israelites were infatuated with the idea of a king. They had been taught that they did not need an earthly king, for God was their king. It is God, after all, who has the ultimate power and authority over all of us, and the Israelites believed that, but they wanted to be like the other nations who had strong and powerful rulers. It’s hard to be a great nation without a great leader. A king is the embodiment of power and sovereignty.

Eventually, Israel got a king. Remember the story of Saul, who was succeeded by David, who unified the country. Then came his son, Solomon, another great king. It was all downhill after that! It wasn’t long until other kings swooped in and took over, and the Israelite monarchy became just a memory in people’s minds.

But Israel never lost the memory, the dream that someday they would again be a great kingdom led by a great king who would restore the monarchy. This king would bring the nation together once again, and would lead so well that Israel would again be a strong nation. All the nations of the world would at last have to sit up and take notice. One day Israel would get a king from God who was worthy of the title. That king would be known as the Messiah, one who would come to power, not through savvy political maneuvering, but as a gift from God.

When a baby named Jesus was born in the hinterland, Matthew said there were some that saw in this baby great possibilities for the future. It was reported that angels announced his birth, filling the heavens and singing “*Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace and*

*goodwill.*” This is royal rhetoric. Angels are messengers sent to make a royal proclamation. At last Israel will have a new king! Now the tables will be turned on the Romans. Now Israel will be reestablished as a great nation. Now there will be payback time. Hail to the king!

So it was that there was great excitement when Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday of long ago. The excitement continued as Jesus entered the Temple and threw out the moneychangers. But then there is that dinner — where Jesus does not announce his takeover, but instead tells the disciples that he is going to die, and that his disciples will desert him and that Peter, their leader, will deny him. Eventually Jesus ascends to the royal palace, but not to take up his throne there. Rather he is tried by this Roman bureaucrat named Pilate, and the same people who a few days before shouted “Hosanna,” now speak with one voice calling for his crucifixion.

“Are you a king?” Pilate asks, almost with a sneer. Are you a potential threat to my authority? Jesus, standing there before Pilate does not look like a threat to anybody! It must have been exasperating to Pilate that Jesus answers his questions with more questions. Jesus never directly says, “Yes, I am a king,” or “No, I am not a king.” He does say “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, you don’t need to be afraid of me, Pilate. I’m not here to take over your palace and your authority. I’m not interested in ruling Israel, or any other country, for that matter.

Yet we must not dismiss Jesus’ words as having nothing to do with the here and now. When we hear talk about the kingdom of God, it is easy to assume that Jesus is talking about life after death and that heavenly realm when all will dwell secure with God. We need to examine Jesus’ words more closely. We need to reflect a little more on what he is really saying and the implications for his first century audience. In so doing, we will discern some implications for our lives today.

“Are you a king?” asks Pilate. In a sense, Jesus is guilty as charged, for his disciples referred to him as their “Lord.” The phrase “Jesus is Lord” is the most widely spread early Christian affirmation, and these words “Jesus is Lord,” the oldest confession of our faith, have significant political implications.

The key to seeing the political meaning of “Jesus is Lord,” is realizing that “Lord” was one of the titles of the Roman emperor. Caesar was called “Lord.” To say “Jesus is Lord” is to say “Caesar is not Lord.” To affirm the lordship of Christ is to deny the lordship of Caesar.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity: Discovering a Life of Faith*, Marcus Borg explains that several of the titles of Jesus in the New Testament were also titles of Caesar on coins and inscription. Caesar was referred to not only as “Lord,” but also as “Son of God,” “Savior,” “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords.” Caesar was also spoken of as the one who had brought peace on earth. Early Christians used all of this language to refer, not to Caesar, but to Jesus.

Thus, the familiar “Jesus is Lord,” now almost a Christian cliché, originally challenged the lordship of the emperor. It still does. To use examples from more recent times, it is like Christians in Nazi Germany saying, “Jesus is mein Fuhrer,” and thus, Hitler is not. Or in the United State, it would mean saying, “Jesus is my Commander in Chief,” and thus, the President is not. (1)

In January of 2006, Ginny Steiger and my wife, Barb, and I were part of a mission work team that spent nearly two weeks in Costa Rica. Before we went, we had to get our passports updated. Our passports indicate that we are citizens of the United States. There was no question

about that when we were going through customs. But we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. That may be a little more difficult to prove, for several reasons.

Jesus declares that his kingdom is not of this world. Yet his kingdom exists, just as surely as does the United States of America. The reason Pilate was threatened is because the value system of the Kingdom of God is sometimes at odds with the value system of the kingdoms of this world. When the chips are down, we have to decide with which kingdom we will align ourselves.

In the early church, the words “Jesus is Lord” could not be said easily or glibly. There were strong political implications. What are the political implications of making Jesus the Lord of our lives today? Surely following the way of Jesus means making some tough decisions and some difficult choices in our day as well as in the day when Pilate was in charge.

Where do we see evidence of Christ’s reign breaking through in our time, and how do we align ourselves with what God is doing in the world today? Martin Luther said that we see the reign of Christ when we see grace applied, forgiveness extended, and hope engendered. Or to put it in the words of Obery Hendericks in his *Politics of Jesus*, “*In essence what Jesus imparted to his disciples was that they must strive for true justice on earth as in heaven, as their righteous service to God, that they must honor God by doing indiscriminate justice, by lifting up ‘the least of these’ on the altar of God’s justice and mercy; that they must set in motion a revolution of love and holistic spirituality that demonstrates love for God by treating the needs of even the least of God’s children as holy.*” (2)

In short, it is it any easier or any less radical to be a citizen of the kingdom of God in our day than it was on the day when Jesus stood before Pilate? The question for us always is this: Who has the ultimate authority over our lives and to which kingdom will we give our ultimate allegiance?

“Are you a king?” asks Pilate. Maybe Jesus did not answer the question because he wants us to answer that question. Is this one who lived nonviolently, who taught and who enacted suffering, sacrificial love, who forgave his enemies and embraced the outcast and the marginalized — is this one also a king? And if he is a king, how do we respond as subjects of his kingdom? Is Jesus your ruler, or is Pilate? It reminds me of the Bob Dylan song, “*You Gotta Serve Somebody.*” Who is the ruler of your life?

Let these words of South African Alan Paton, author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, be our prayer this day: “*O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others; open my ears that I may hear their cries; open my heart so that they need not be without succor; let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich ... And so open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for them.*” (3)

Yes, we are called to be citizens of two kingdoms. May we never forget where our ultimate loyalty lies.

*Prayer:* Dear God, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, help us to hear your voice saying, “My kingdom is not of this world.” And then you say, “Follow me.” Help us to remember that we are citizens of two kingdom. May we never forget where our ultimate loyalty lies. We pray in the name of Jesus, the one whom we call “Lord.” Amen.

Notes:

1. Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity: Discovering a Life of Faith*. Harper Collins, 2003., pp. 135-136.
2. Hendericks, Obery M., Jr. *The Politics of Jesus*. Quoted in *Behold! Arts for the Church Year*. Pentecost 2 2009 (Year B), p. 2.
3. Paton. Alan. *Open My Eyes*. Quoted in *Behold! Arts for the Church Year*. Pentecost 2 2009 (Year B), p. 21.