St Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

2 Samuel 23:1-7

Psalm 132: 1-13

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

Thy Kingdom Come

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come…..

What is a “kingdom.” The one I was born into this earthly life had its earthly king, but he died and ever since I can remember, there’s been a queen sitting on the throne. But we still don’t call it a “queendom.” It’s not as if Queen Elizabeth II was the first woman to be called “Your Majesty.” There was the first Elizabeth, who showed a lot of kings about good leadership. Then there was Mary…but, well, no need to bring up bad blood. The Elizabeth’s are enough to make the point.

And the point is that for some people, the word “kingdom” evokes less than pleasant associations. This is true for many, may we say, Christians in this politically correct world. And yet, those same Christians don’t think twice about praying, “Thy kingdom come,” when they choose to say their prayers.

Pontius Pilate was confused, too. In his world there were kings and there were kings. Most kings, or emperors, were absolute rulers, not to be crossed or disobeyed. Now, here before him stands someone who looks more like dusty peasant than resplendent royalty.

He asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” We can imagine Pilate asking the question in several ways which would reveal some of his own incredulity. “Are ***you*** the King of the Jews?” meaning, you don’t look like any king I’m used to seeing. Or, “Are you the ***King*** of the Jews?” meaning, are you responsible for the Jewish nation, all of Judah, because if you are, you’re going to have to let me know your demands.

Jesus comes right back with his own interesting inquiry: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” meaning, what do you know, what is the depth of your knowledge about me, and who have you been talking to? The repartee is interesting in that, up until this point, Pilate and Jesus are having a conversation that Pilate can understand. Pilate responds that he is not Jewish and that his own people and their chief priests, over whom Jesus is somehow king, have turned Jesus into the Roman authorities and Pilate, still confused, asks what Jesus could have done that would have caused this turn of events.

Then the conversation moves into an argument that would raise the hackles of any good Roman officer. “My kingdom is not of this world,” says Jesus. He’s not just some earthly king, Jesus explains, a worldly king come to stage a coup. If that were true, this scene would be very different. The people who follow me would never have turned me over to you. They would have been fighting you at this moment. But that is not who I am, and not what you think I am. “My kingdom”, explains Jesus, with frank truthfulness, is not bound by the rules of this world. My kingdom is not from this world, at all.

Pilate is still confused, although he thinks he’s getting to the bottom of this strange encounter with Jesus. “So you are a king?” Pilate presses, in search of answers that make sense.

And Jesus answers, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” And everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice,” meaning, that it is“truth” which is king in my kingdom. Not a person, not a political success, not a great warrior, but that which reveals the truth in its absolute. Not a partial truth, but the whole truth and nothing but the truth, about oneself and about God.

And there we have it. As 21st Century Christians, with 2,000 years of hindsight and scholarship, we get what Jesus means. But don’t expect for a minute, that Pilate, or any of his fellow Romans officers would. We are familiar with all the Gospel accounts, each in their own way playing out this scene, so we are not surprised by this conversation. But our truth be told, we talk more about Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior, the Redeemer, even Lord, meaning he owns us, our hearts, bodies and souls. But, in casual conversation with each other, we don’t refer to “the King” as a general practice. We refer to Jesus. The One whom we revere and call “Emmanuel”, God with us. God not king. Jesus, not king. And yet, we sing “Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In a way, we’re just as confused regarding usage of the term as was Pilate in his time, but make no mistake, Jesus refers to the kingdom all through the scriptures. He is at home with the word “kingdom” and understands well the meaning of the word. We can hear him in Mark[[2]](#footnote-2), coming into Galilee, teaching and preaching about the Good News of the kingdom of God, and , also in Mark’s Gospel, the response we recently heard Jesus give to the curious scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We sing about it in Hymn #711: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness….” Lifted right out of the Gospel of Matthew.[[4]](#footnote-4) Also from Matthew, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you.” Matthew 13:11. And in Luke[[5]](#footnote-5), we shall hear again this year, “the kingdom of God is within you.”

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God in excess of 80 times in the New Testament. The kingdom of God is clearly his focus in his preaching and teaching.

So, perhaps its high time that we got over our sensitivity to using the word kingdom, and took some time to learn how to understand just what the kingdom of God means, and how we are supposed to pass that understanding along to a confused world which only understands national kings and leaders who are usually trying to outdo each other at the cost of soldier and civilian lives alike.

We can start by simply saying what Jesus said. The kingdom of God is about the reign of God. Not over just one nation or territory, but over all worlds and universes throughout the cosmos since the beginning of time. You just can’t get bigger than God, whether you are called Emperor, King, Queen, President, or head of the school board, or your local neighborhood associarion. You do not rule. God rules. If you believe in Jesus, you believe in the reign of God, who reigns over all your decisions about how you lead, how you treat other people, how you respond to the needs of the world, the degree of your kindness, and the depth of your love.

The kingdom of God, ruled by God, in the realm of God is all about goodness and truth. It is not a place to visit and then revert to one’s old ways of being which are acceptable under Caesar. It is within the realm of God that the faithful is led to work for what is good and true, and to work against what is unjust and untrue and at odds with all Gods ask of God’s people. The realm of God knows no national boundaries, or differences in race or culture. It has no interest in one’s denomination whether one is right or left, evangelical or atheist. It has no time or interest in politics which seems to absorb so much of our time. Nor does one get extra points for sending out sentimental notes and cards in God’s name, while vilifying God’s people just for one’s own satisfaction or desire to be king of the hill.

No. It is time for us to understand, not just how to use this entity Jesus calls the kingdom of God. It is time for us to embrace it as a community of all living beings, called to be called each one and as community into radical acceptance of the possibilities it offers: peace, joy, love, and truth.

We won’t always get it back when we offer it, no matter how much we try to live within the boundaries of God’s requirements to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and as Jesus added, with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Unrequited love is never fun in this world, but unrequited love in the realm of God, will never be acceptable within the kingdom of God.

Even knowing this, we find it challenging to give up trying to answer love with real love in the spiritual sense. But there is always hope in the realm of God. The love of God, and the loving truth of God’s kingdom has never not existed, and yet is still to come. While it is not always easy to find, the kingdom of God is always open to those who choose to enter into its mystery. We will never truly understand it, and yet the reality of the reign of God is solid and so profound, that we cannot deny it.

We think of place of worship, like this sanctuary, as being a place where the realm of God can be found. And yet, as was recently pointed out to me, when we were, and still are, meeting on Zoom to worship, pray or study the scriptures, regardless of who we are we are invited to enter into the realm of God. We are still Church regardless of how and where we come together in God’s name. We are still part of that which makes the kingdom of God visible and alive in the same way Jesus made the kingdom visible and alive when he walked among us.

So we are faced with a kind of paradox. We can think of the kingdom as a loving and peaceful place, beautiful and inspiring, while at the same time, it demands more of us than we seem capable of giving. To love God unconditionally and to love others as one loves oneself is simple and yet almost too complex for us to respond. We talk and pray about the sovereignty of God, a concept outside of ourselves and yet the reign of God exists in each human heart which responds to its sovereignty according to the choices of each human mind.

The opportunities to enter the kingdom of God are countless, even though we may not recognize them when they are made apparent to us. Yet it is when God enters into our hearts, that we become made holy by God’s presence alone. The words “Thy kingdom come…” points directly to God’s authority that rules heart and mind. It is at this point, at the time that God enters a human heart, that the kingdom of God, has come among us on earth again.

It is then that peace reigns, and not anger and hatred. It is then that joyous acceptance is experienced, not resentful competition to be right, best or first. It is then that we are finally able to say, what is mine is yours and the reason for war finally comes to an end.

So the choice is ours. Will we be able to answer the question when it is put to us: “Where is this kingdom you speak of, and who is your king?”

Will we say, well, we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, but we can’t explain just where the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks about, actually is.

Or will we answer truthfully, and say, “Whoever would pour love into their heart for God, for themselves and for their neighbors, is very close to the kingdom of God.”

Such were Jesus’ words to the curious scribe, and such are His words to us. All we have to do, is understand that through our love, we will become closer still to the kingdom of God.

It is the place where we have always belonged and still belong, just as God’s people always will. And any time we think we cannot find the kingdom or lose sight of the king, we simply pray, “Thy kingdom come,” and then, with fresh resolve, renewed faith and deepened love, we journey on, following the Light of the One who will lead us home.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E.J. R. Culver+

November 21, 2021

1. Text and music copyright 1981, Ateliers et Presses de Taize (France). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 1:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark 12;34 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 6:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke: 17:20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)