

“Of Crowns and Kings”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 22nd 2015 (Reign of Christ Sunday)
by Foster Freed

John 18: 33-38

Of Crowns and Kings! That’s the title...the title I affixed to these remarks a few weeks back, when I first began to ponder this Sunday...this final Sunday in the Christian calendar...a Sunday that has come to be known as Christ the King Sunday or, as we in the mainline Protestant churches have come to refer to it, making use of a slightly less in your face designation, Reign of Christ Sunday. In light of that designation...and in light of that fascinating exchange between Jesus and Pilate...

...an exchange so typical of John’s Gospel in which Jesus repeatedly finds himself in conversation with people who misconstrue his every word!...

...in light of all that, it’s not hard to understand why I would baptize a sermon for this day with that rather medieval sounding title! Of Crowns! Of Kings! Of Crowns and Kings!

But you know...as I’ve given it more thought...as I’ve given it more thought...I realize that it would have been just as apt...just as apt for me to have called these remarks: “Confessions! Confessions of a Political Junkie”.

Permit me to explain. And permit me to do that by telling you a little bit about how I typically begin my day.

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On a typical day...not every day but most days...I fire up the computer, shortly after I fire up the tea pot. And then...having given the computer a chance to warm up, I go to my web-explorer of choice, and begin to peruse a number of favourite websites: first a number of newspapers (New York Times, National Post, etc.), followed by a number of journals and magazines that offer commentary on the news. And yes: the vast majority of the reading I do at the start of the day, sometimes up to the first two hours of my day, tends to be political stories, both domestic and international. You see: when I speak of “Crowns” and “Kings”, though the terminology may be medieval, the interest to which it points could not be more contemporary. On the contrary: those two words—Crowns and Kings—conjure up for me the whole realm of the political and its various offshoots. To say that political happenings are an obsession for me would be to overstate the case, but to insist that political comings and goings

are of keen interest, a central interest, would be an entirely apt observation. Which is why...

...which is why it's impossible for me not to sit up and take notice when our Lord—during his encounter with Pontius Pilate, at the time one of the most politically powerful men on the face of the planet, representing the man who may well have been the most politically powerful man on the face of the planet, namely the Emperor of Rome—impossible for me not to sit up and take notice when our Lord, having in one breath acquiesced to the notion that he is a King, with his next breath proceeds to insist that his “Kingdom...his Kingship...is not of this world....is not of this world.” Mind you!

Some of you—listening closely during our scripture reading—may have noticed a subtle shift found in our modern translation from older translations. It was long traditional to hear Christ state that his Kingdom is not “of” this world...whereas our translation modifies that to claim that his Kingdom is not “from” this world. That change...I'll have you know...was of sufficient interest to me that I found myself checking in with Nanaimo's resident expert in all things Greek and Latin, namely my colleague Bert Ramsey, who assures me that either translation can be defended...but that, in context, the older translation seems to make a great deal more sense. And since that's what I also think, for the remainder of my remarks, this morning, I'm going to presume...

...if you're up on your Greek we can debate this over a slice of New Members cake after the service!...

...I'm going to presume that the older translation is accurate, and that Jesus tells Pilate that his Kingdom is not “of” this world which—given the fact that he will be dead within 24 hours of this conversation with Pilate—is hopefully an accurate statement, since his Kingdom, if it was of this world, had an exceedingly brief shelf-life. But now here's the thing.

As a disciple...as a follower of this Jesus...when he insists that his Kingdom is not of this world, I frankly have a hard time not hearing that as a personal rebuke...

...how dare he suggest that a “Christian political junkie” may be a contradiction in terms!. But then, having heard it as a personal rebuke, I also have a hard time not hearing it as a dangerously naïve statement, a statement bound to be misused by those disciples who wish to shirk their political responsibilities, who wish to bury their heads in the sand, who wish to build fenced in little Christian conclaves, in the hope that the rest of the world will just leave us alone so that we never have to dirty our hands with “crowns and kings”...never have to soil ourselves with anything as distasteful as politics! Then again!

There are certainly times when the option of unplugging the TV, smashing the radio, and disconnecting the computer is so tempting, that I'm actually surprised more of us don't embrace that option. For many of us, as we look at the winds of war that seem to be blowing in from so many different directions, this is surely one such time: a time when it is ever so tempting to turn our backs on the whole messy business, remind ourselves that we follow a King whose Kingdom is not of this world, and lean back to watch the world go by. And yes: when I think of those times when I have allowed political realities—both here and abroad—to drive me into a state of depression, I'm not convinced that it would be inappropriate for me to do precisely that, at least for a season. And yet!

When I look at the history books...when I look at today's headlines...it's impossible not to be reminded that political power misused, can misshape human life as few other forces can succeed in misshaping human life. To tell ourselves that Jesus has somehow given us permission to take a permanent holiday from history...to delude ourselves into thinking that we, simply because we are his disciples, are no longer called to responsible thought and action in the political sphere, is to pretty much guarantee that the field will be left wide open for those who would be far more inclined to misuse power...those who would be far less constrained from wielding power to their own ends rather than for the common good. In the words of one of my heroes, a man named Edmund Burke: "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil...

...the only thing...the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men...for good men...to do nothing."

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Let's pull back for a moment. Let's pull back from this talk of "crowns and kings"...from this talk of that messy business we call politics. Let's make a quick detour...let's visit another portion of this encounter, this encounter between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. In particular, let's recall that stunning point in the encounter—really its climax—in which Jesus claims that he has come to bear witness to the truth, a claim that evinces from Pilate a shrug, and the asking of a seemingly mocking question, a question that is drenched in cynical world-weariness: "What is truth?" What? What is truth?

Seems to me...seems to me that those of us, weary and wondering though we be...those of us who suspect that we Christians do, in fact, have a vocation to expend at least some of our energy trying to work within the political realities of **this** world...

...seems to me that those of us so inclined can do a lot worse than to start there: to start with the recognition that "truth" matters...the recognition that human beings, when they commit acts of brutality—whatever the politics to which they subscribe—are not only guilty of doing something ugly, are not only

guilty of doing something evil, but are also guilty of doing something that violates the truth of the world, the truth of God, beginning with that most basic of political truths, namely that each and every human being, regardless of their tribe, their race, their clan, is a precious creature in the eyes of God, fashioned in God's own image, and destined for goodness and for glory. And you know: while I'm far from convinced that the Lord Jesus wants any of his followers to become "political junkies"...I am convinced that he calls us, while we are here on this earth, to a politics that does recognize each human being as precious, a sister, a brother to the Christ we purport to follow. Indeed!

Just this past week...just this past week I was involved in two different conversations in which two very different people used the same precise phrase in order to explain why they come to church. In each instance what they said is this. "I come to church to check on my moral compass." I come to church to check on my moral compass. Which is to say: I come to Church because truth does matter...that it matters whether the choices I make, the responsibilities I undertake, the commitments I into which I enter—to the best of my vision and ability—are aligned with the truth. To cite but one further example: no doubt when one of this congregation's new members took her life in her hand while still a teenager, over 70 years ago, to serve with the Danish underground, she did that because her moral compass told her that she needed to take a stand...told her that aligning herself with the truth was no small thing...was a very big thing...something worth living for...something, if need be, worth dying for.

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"My Kingdom...my Kingdom is not of this world." Words which do not excuse those of us who seek to follow the King who uttered those words, from seeking to live responsibly as citizens of the various Kingdoms in which we find ourselves placed during our brief sojourn on this earth. And yet...and yet!

Words which perhaps do succeed in keeping us sane, if only we will heed them! Heed them as a reminder that those who have come to place their trust in this particular King—the one Pilate's minions would soon crown with a crown of thorns...

...a reminder that our peculiar vocation—our strange calling as his followers—is to participate in the politics of this bruised and broken world without ever losing sight of the fact that such politics will always fall short of the mark, meaning...! Meaning, at a bare minimum, that we ought to succumb neither to despair or to fanatical obsession when things look bleak in the life of this world! A reminder that the political realm, for all of its importance...and yes, for all of the ugliness it can spawn when the wrong people are given power...is not a realm to which we should become so attached, that we fail to remain anchored in the things that actually make life worth living.

A beautiful sunset! A lover's embrace! A child's laughter! A work of art that speaks with power and precision! An evening spent with good friends! A pot of soup you've prepared that will feed the hungry in a local soup kitchen! An hour spent consoling a grieving neighbour. A hymn sung to God's glory, in the midst of God's gathered community! Far from being distractions from the so-called serious things...the things over which every well trained political junky obsesses....such precious moments may well be the moments that point most tellingly to that which will abide. That which will abide through time and eternity: in and through the love of the true King...the One who's Kingdom beckons from afar...the One who's kingdom stirs us even here, even now.

May the light and the love of His Kingdom's power, guide and comfort us, this day...and forever more. Amen!