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### A Royal Kingdom of Priests

Texts: John 18:33-38; Revelations 1:4b-8

When Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, Pilate asked him point blank: “Are you the king of the Jews?” As the Roman governor, Pilate surely needed to know whether or not he had a revolutionary leader on his hands, one who would stir up the people and a lot of trouble. Yet while he must have been worried about the inconvenience of trouble, at the same time he would have had little doubt about the outcome of any insurgency trying to rise against Roman power. So when he asked Jesus this question, there must have been a touch of irony in it. No matter if Jesus thought he was the king of the Jews or not, Caesar still ruled. Yet, as it turns out, Jesus gives Pilate an answer that he didn’t expect. Jesus simply says: “My kingdom is not from this world.” So yes, he is a king. But his kingdom is not from this world.

I suspect despite the ironical condescension, the haughty superiority with which Pilate treats Jesus, that he is relieved. After all how much trouble can a kingdom not of this world cause?

I also suspect that when we read this passage that we are relieved, too. We, too, think that a kingdom not from this world cannot cause much trouble. To know that Jesus’ kingdom is not from this world takes the burden of acting as if he were Lord and ruler of this world off us. Not entirely, of course. Jesus is still king. But if his kingdom is not from this world, then that allows us to live life as if there were two kingdoms: one where Christ is king, and another where Augustus or his latter day replacement is emperor; one a kingdom of ideals, and one a kingdom of reality, a kingdom of necessary violences.

Now, in this we probably haven't changed much from ancient Israel. As the Bible tells it, ancient Israel, *our* spiritual ancestors, kept limping with two opinions, in the words of the prophet Elijah. They worshiped the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and much of the time in the early history they also worshiped Baal the god of the land into which they were brought. Although the Bible tells the story in such a way that it appears that they didn't do this when they first came into the land and that it was only later that they soiled their religious purity, it is entirely likely that limping with two opinions was a very early practice. After all, Yahweh, the Lord of Israel had helped them fight battles, and had wandered with them as they sojourned in the wilderness. Yahweh had in fact wandered with their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The problem was that now they were settled in a land, and weren't wandering anymore. Could this Yahweh who had before tended them like a shepherd grow crops? Baal, a god of fertility could. If that was so, if fertility wasn't Yahweh's thing anyhow, would it even be a matter of betraying him anyhow if you went to specialist for something he didn't cover? Something like that one suspects may be the explanation for Israel's hard hearted refusal to give up toying with idols until they finally had the promised land taken away from them and were sent into exile in Babylon. If that explanation is right, then what Israel did was simply, as we say, compartmentalized their religion. The promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the celebration of the Exodus was brought out for certain occasions. At other points, however, it seemed to have no real claim on their lives. There were effectively two kings of their lives.

So, too, many of us, their descendants. We have a religion for Sunday , and another one for the rest of the week. We have a religious religion and we have a civil religion where our contemporary versions of Caesar are the high priests. We have a religion of ideals, and we have a religion of power for the real world. And why shouldn't we if Christ's kingdom is not of this

world, and we have to live in this world?

But is this what Jesus really meant for us to do when he said that his kingdom was not from this world? How we answer that question is important for on it depends what we mean when we say that Christ is King today, the final Sunday of the church year.

Well, let me first of all say flat out that what the Christian church means when it says that Christ is King is that it means he really is king, he is the *only* real king and his kingdom is not someplace else other than where we live. What the church means by saying that Christ is king is everything that the prophets talked about, such as that all flesh shall bow before him, that he is the desire of the nations, and the King of kings and Lord of lords. But if that is what is meant then what was Jesus actually saying to Pilate when he told him that his kingdom is not of this world?

First of all, he is not saying that his kingdom is *separate* from this world; that would be a very serious misreading of the text. Rather what he is doing is inviting his listener to draw an explicit comparison between his kingship and the kingships one normally finds in the world. As John tells the story, if you want to see what kingship that is from this world is like, you look at Pilate or Augustus. Thus here in this scene you have in Pilate, on the one hand, Caesar Augustus' representative, you have a kingship from this world. And what is that like? Well, although the king's representative finds no case against Jesus, still he lets him be executed anyhow because it is convenient to do so. So the king's representative doesn't seem to mind judicial murder at all, or mind releasing a genuine criminal in place of the innocent man to walk the streets as a predator again. That is why four hundred years later St. Augustine could declare the glorious *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, a fraud; at best its virtue was simply a splendid vice. So when Jesus says that his kingdom not from this world he is saying that his kingship is not like that. And in

fact he explicitly says that, for he says that *if* his kingdom were of this world then his followers would be fighting to keep him alive. In short, if his kingdom were from this world he would act in this world the same way that Caesar or Pilate or the High Priest does. But since his kingdom is not from this world, then in this world he does not act like that.

Let me then draw the conclusion of the comparison very quickly and very pointedly: that proclaiming Christ as king, as the desire of the nations, means that we, too, are not to act in this world the way that the kings of the world act. We are to act in this world in such a way that proclaims and acknowledges that the world's real king doesn't rule by violence, or power. The real king rules by love, and light, and justice. If Christ is King then the point is that we are to act as if the world had changed and that the power mongers aren't really in charge. We are to do things differently. We are to live like subjects of this king whose kingdom is not of this world.

But what does it mean to act like that? Well, it undoubtedly is the task of a lifetime and the topic of many books to spell that out completely. So let us confine ourselves to a single description of that kind of life.

In the book of Revelations, which we read moments ago, Jesus Christ is talked of as the one who loves us and frees us, and who "made us to be a kingdom of priests serving his God and Father..." It is an interesting description to talk of the members of Christ's kingdom as priests. It is, however, not hyperbole, nor is it a mere fancy metaphor. John's seriousness about using this description for the nature of God's kingdom is seen in the fact that he uses it several times in the book. In chapter five, for example, the lamb on the throne is famously described as the one who ransomed by his blood saints from every tribe and language and people and nation, making them to be a kingdom of priests serving our God. Now, John has a very good reason for using this description, and the church has a very good reason for letting it highlight the final book of its

story, the book that describes the kingdom God will bring. That reason is simply that this is also description that God uses at the *beginning* of the story when he tells the people what he is going to make of them. In the book of *Exodus*, after God has led the people out of Egypt and has brought them to Mount Sinai where he will give them the Law, he says to them that he has brought them here from Egypt on eagle's wings and that they are to be his treasured possession out of all the peoples. "Indeed," God declares, "the whole earth is mine but you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." When God then subsequently gives them the Law, he does so in order that through it they might fulfill the destiny set for them, the destiny of being a kingdom of priests. *Revelations* in saying that Christ is King is saying that they have now become the kingdom of priests that he meant them to be from the very beginning.

Now, that gives some important initial indications of what it means to proclaim Christ as king. To proclaim him as king means that we are to act among ourselves as a kingdom of priests, just as God had always meant us to be. But how do we do that? What does that mean for us?

Well, first of all it means something about the church that Martin Luther and John Calvin famously pointed out. It means that there is a priesthood of all believers. Nobody is exempted. We all serve. Now, that service may be very different for each of us. Some people are called to be ministers of the Gospel, some are called to be elders, some deacons. To be called to one of those offices doesn't mean that one is called to all of them. But understand despite our particular vocations; all are called to live as God intended. Nobody gets a pass because they don't have a special call to church ministry, and nobody in professional ministry gets to say they are exempted from doing what is expected of all of us simply because he or she is already giving so much in his or her ministry. Nobody gets time off from this common expectation, because of a special vocation. We are all called to serve all the time in the kingdom.

To be a kingdom of priests also means that we are to be a holy people. That is clear from the context in Exodus: God tells the people of Israel that he brought them out of Egypt to be this kind of people, and he then gives them the Law to help make them that. Priests, of course, are supposed to be holy and they are to be pure. Profane hands are not to touch the things of God, and therefore much of the ancient law of Israel had to do with keeping ritual purity so that the things of God would not be profaned. We do not worry about ritual purity in the same way. Because of Jesus' own teaching we claim that holiness and purity go much deeper than ritual purity. Holiness above all includes our duties to God and to our brothers and sisters; as Christ himself summarized it, it means simply that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbors as our selves. That sort of single-minded love for God and neighbor is in the final analysis what it really means to be holy.

But, even if we don't worry about ritual purity much, still that doesn't mean that personal holiness is beside the point. It is closely connected to caring for God and neighbor. There aren't two kingdoms here, either, the kingdom of our personal lives and the kingdom of our dealings with others. There are not two kings here – us and God. There is only one. If we think about it for very long we will realize that what we are able to do for God or our neighbor is highly dependent on what we have made of ourselves in our personal lives. If our lives are chaotic, a matter of flitting from one commitment to another without finishing anything, we will most likely fail to be very disciplined with respect to prayer or caring for others. They will not be able to count on us. If we let ourselves get angry or privately harbor resentments, it is almost inevitable that we will at some point take our anger and resentments out on others. If we play fast and loose with the truth about ourselves, we will soon be found to be untrustworthy by others or to be people of poor judgement, not to be listened to. So to be a kingdom of priests does mean to be a holy

nation both with respect to loving God and neighbor *and* with respect to our personal integrity.

Finally, being a kingdom of priests means that as priests we intercede for one another. For what priests do is they intercede, they pray for others. They comfort others, they offer sacrifices for others. That is what Jesus as our great high priest does. It is what we do for each other in his name. So as a kingdom of priests we make it our business not only to have for ourselves right standing with God, and a personal relation to Jesus. We also make it our business, if Christ is King and we are a kingdom of priests, to care about how the world goes, too. It is our business that the world has stand right with God, and that the world as a whole be a kingdom of priests.

Let me say how we can do that. It is very simply by acting on an understanding of kingship that is not from this world. We know how kings of this world act, whether we call them kings, or presidents, or prime ministers, or CEOs, or what not. While I think that it really does make a difference who is in charge of the government, that all politicians are not the same, still, in the end, we all have to recognize that the way governments run is always a question of more or less overt power. All the kingdoms we have seen are kingdoms from this world; some are better, some are worse. So if we are going to play the role of priests interceding for the world that it may have right standing with God, we are going to have to do something more than simply vote for the somewhat better over the somewhat worse. We are going to have to show the world by the way we live how real leadership goes; that means we have to live *in* the church with a very different understanding of power and authority than the world has. We need to give the world an alternative to its weary, soul sapping, bone grinding, tear filled ways of power and authority that are based in violence and self-interest. We need to live differently, and in living differently show the world how it might have life. And that is where our religion can *never* be simply a personal matter, one where it is indifferent to us what other people believe and do. For if we are going to

proclaim Christ as the king of the world in our lives, then with our lives in this world we are going to have to show the world how to live, and how to avoid destroying souls and ultimately itself. And that for us, is what it means to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.