
The Interrogation

John 18:33-37 - Christ the King Sunday

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 24, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer

Let us pray: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, not as a baby in weakness and vulnerability, but in the fullness of your royal power. Amen.

When I was a school boy back in Missouri, we were big on disaster drills. And it wasn't just the occasional fire or tornado drill we had; these were nuclear attack drills. It was the height of the Cold War. Our community had a warning system. Some families in our neighborhood had well stocked bomb shelters. For all we knew the big one could happen any time. Sometimes the class was taken to a protected place in the school basement; other times we were told simply to crawl under our desks, the thought being, I suppose, that there's nothing like a sturdy pine school desk to ward off a hydrogen bomb.

Several weeks ago I was talking with my grandson, who attends a middle school here in the state. He told me that their school had recently gone into lock down. Apparently, someone was seen with a gun or had fired a gun a few blocks from the school. "What happens in a lock down?" I asked. He said, "We try to make the room look empty." "How?" I asked. "We crawl under our desks."

Some things never change, I thought. We still have the kids crawling under their desks. And we are still afraid, not so much of God or the Russians, but of ourselves.

For most of its existence the human race has lived under the threat of "the End." It seems a rule of thumb that both for our primitive ancestors and for us: death comes from the sky. A bolt of lightning, a stray meteorite, a couple of 737s on the New York skyline, a drone, a bullet from a Book Depository in Dallas and with it the power to end an entire era. Out of the blue, as we say. 50 years ago this past Friday we learned the tragic difference between Camelot and the Kingdom of God. How fragile is the one—six seconds on the Zapruder film—how permanent and eternal the other.

When most Christians think of "the End," they (we) instinctively look up. In the Gospels Jesus says,

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

And the stars will be falling from heaven . . .

Then they will see the son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

When you see these things, Look up! Your salvation is drawing near.

In an ancient creed the church confesses about Jesus: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." In a few short weeks this great church will erupt with a version of the same confession, this time from Handel's Messiah:

The kingdom of this world

Has become the kingdom of our God and of his son,

And he shall reign forever,

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

The festival of Christ the King was invented early in the twentieth century to make this very point. Europe was so overrun with powerful dictators, it seemed only right that Christians should celebrate the one who would overshadow the claims of nations and their rulers.

For all that, Christ the King is not a popular festival. Many churches don't observe it. We don't give Christ the King presents or treat it as a holiday. Kings have become irrelevant to the affairs of nations, and the

so-called Second Coming grows more remote with every passing miscalculation. One Christian group calculated the precise day of his return, October 22, 1844. They quit their jobs and took to the high ground. The day has gone down in American religious history as “the Great Disappointment.” Already in the New Testament the complaint is raised in the letter of II Peter, “Where is the promise of his coming?” We have waited patiently for Christ our King. Our heads are up. Where is he?

Today’s Gospel reading, which recreates a small segment of a conversation between Jesus and Pontus Pilate, gives a surprising answer. It says, “Lower your gaze. Take your eyes off the clouds. Look around you.” It’s a little disorienting to walk into church—maybe you were a few minutes late—just in time to hear a Holy Week reading in late November! Have we slept through Christmas? It’s not a misprint. Ms. Brown did not read the wrong passage. The fact is, the majority of references in the Gospels to Jesus as king do not refer to his celestial power but to his trial and crucifixion.

Where is Christ our king? There he is. He is being interrogated by a midlevel bureaucrat in the Roman foreign service, the governor of Judea. I am guessing it was Jesus who was made to stand for his trial, and it was Pontius Pilate who sat on his Roman—seat of authority—for the interrogation. By definition an “interrogation” is marked by a severe power imbalance. The one interrogated is either beaten into submission or, as in the Stockholm Syndrome, emotionally manipulated until he becomes attached to values of his interrogator. When you listen to this exchange between Jesus and Pilate, it’s not a matter of one person holding more power than the other but rather a collision of two kinds of power.

Notice Pilate’s demeanor. When the religious leaders first accuse Jesus of being an “evil doer” Pilate does not bat an eyelash—because Pilate himself is an “evil doer.” This is a Roman who slaughtered thousands of Samaritans to show them who was boss. Morality is not a major factor in his decision-making process. Next they accuse Jesus of claiming to be the “Son of God,” and once again Pilate doesn’t go for the bait. He wasn’t posted to this godforsaken province to settle religious controversies. Theology is not a major interest of his. But when they say, “He makes himself a king,” Pilate is all ears. Because this is politics, and people who believe in God can cause a lot of trouble to the state. The interview goes something like this:

Pilate: Are you the king of the Jews?

Jesus: Whose idea is that? Surely not yours . . .

Pilate: Am I a Jew? Am I a deluded member of your religious sect?

Jesus: If I were your kind of king, you would have a fight on your hands. But I am another kind of king. My power has another source.

Pilate: (now fixated on one idea) So you are a king?

Jesus: That’s what you say, but then you don’t know what you are saying. I was born to be king. O never mind.

The interview ends badly. Jesus refuses to be interrogated by a dictator. And Pilate, because he is a dictator, is under no obligation to find common ground with the prisoner. He simply gives him his crown and robe. The trial ends in a sight-gag. Can there be any sadder spectacle than the Son of God dressed like a clown-king as the crowd goes wild?

John the evangelist makes it clear: everything is backward. Jesus should be interrogating Pilate. He should be asking him about the brutality for which Pilate was famous. Pilate should be standing (or, better, kneeling) before Jesus as Jesus asks him about what he, the dictator, is doing to be an honest and just ruler. Does he care that people are suffering in Judea under his administration? Does he care that poor people are dying? Does he know the kind of violence his troops are visiting on innocent people? Has Roman justice ever heard of mercy? Do you, Mr. Pilate—Governor Pilate—know that your authority comes in some obscure way from God? “You would have no power over me,” Jesus will say later in the interview, “unless it had been given you from above.”

In Dostoyevski’s “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” the church and state in 16th-century Spain have conspired in a reign of terror and despotism. Enemies of the truth are being burned at the stake by the hundreds. Into this scene of church and state-sponsored violence the Lord Jesus returns to be interrogated. He

does not return in glory but in abject humility to stand with those who are being beaten down and crushed. The general immediately recognizes him and tells him in effect, 'Jesus, if what you stand for should become the norm in this city we would lose all power and all control. Go away, or "Tomorrow, I will burn you."

In every generation, including our own, Jesus finds himself the interrogated rather than the interrogator. Of course, a Christian culture like ours is far more respectful of Jesus than ancient Rome, but no more obedient to his claims. If Jesus had been a politician, we would say he had certain signature policies that demonstrated who God is. Apparently, he favored the poor and called them "blessed." But today even his followers support policies that injure the poor and punish them for being poor. He said the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, but we have a law against giving a doughnut to a homeless person in a public park. In a moment of crisis he once said, "Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword," so we have exchanged our swords for bigger and more potent weapons. Attempts to curb the power of the gun are opposed in overwhelming numbers by his "evangelical" supporters. It was King Jesus who said "Suffer the little children," and in places like Sandy Hook and Newtown, they are suffering. He favored a healing initiative for the sick, the blind, and the lame, as a sign of his Father's compassion. But we have made a mess of his compassion. The issue of how we fix the mess and care for people who can't afford to go to a doctor is not a Jesus-question. The issue of whether or not we should care for such people is a Jesus-question.

So how did it get this way? Who appointed us the interrogators? Why this gap between his agenda and ours? We have made salvation a private matter. "He is the King of my heart," we say. And sometimes it seems that this modest space beneath the sternum is his only home in this world. We use his own words as proof. Didn't he himself say to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world." It's true. His kingdom does not originate from the powers of this world—how could it? What dictatorship or deliberative body would ever sponsor a messiah like Jesus?

He may have said his kingdom is not of this world, but this was a king who mounted a donkey, an animal symbolizing peace, and staged a public, triumphant entry into the capital city. You don't challenge the values of empire without proposing an alternative empire of your own. This is a king who walked through the labyrinthine corridors of power and made his way from courtroom to courtroom, until he was finally executed. He was not killed because he told good stories. He was not killed because he said, "I want to be the King of your heart." He was not killed because he wanted to be the new Caesar but because he claimed to be Caesar's Lord.

Just because he didn't raise an army or found a political party doesn't mean that how you and I live politically doesn't matter to him. What if his agenda were to invade ours? We don't even have a picture for that. Isaiah does, and it goes like this:

For every boot of the trampling warrior . . .

Will be burned as fuel for the fire . . .

For unto us a son is given;

And the government will be upon his shoulder

. . . of the increase of his empire and of

Peace there will be no end.

Years ago I came to this university because in a university you are free to interrogate everything. Those of you who are students know how wonderful it is. Every philosophical claim, every scientific theorem, every religious idea, is open to examination. It may sound arrogant, but it is an exhilarating arrogance. But this morning you and I have walked into the one building on this campus where the process of interrogation is absolutely reversed. Here we open ourselves to interrogation by God. Here we try to discover just how much of that other kind of kingship has found a place in our lives. Here we examine not only our hearts but our commitments, our use of money and exercise of power. We don't shine the light in his face, but we say with the Psalmist, O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me."

Everything came to an end for Jesus with his death on the cross. But even in death he does not cease to be King Jesus. Or precisely in death, he reigns. For in his willingness to give himself for others, he reveals the true glory of God. Do you want one last look at King Jesus? Well, look up—not at the clouds but at the cross. Hear him as he says, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.” At last he finds his kingly throne, high and lifted up, from which he has an excellent view of all who wait for him in hope.

Finally, when he is buried, his body is encased in one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, as befitting not just the King of the Jews or the King of my Heart, but the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And on the third day, when he comes out, all creation and we with it cries, “Long live the king!”