

“The Powers That Be”
Text: John 18:33-37; Colossians 1:11-20
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Atlanta, GA
November 25, 2007

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Colossians 1:17

It has never been an easy thing to understand the identity of the man who stood before Pilate accused of plotting sedition against the state. The Roman governor himself was confused as to whom he was dealing with and so he asked the prisoner standing before him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered the question with a question of his own. “Do you ask that on your own account or because of what others have told you about me?”

An exasperated Pilate answered, “Listen, I’m not one of you. It was your people who handed you over to me.” Pilate was confused as to who Jesus was.

Jesus’ own people were not at all clear about his identity either. To the religious leaders, to the powerful, he was a rabble rouser, an outsider, an upstart, a pain in the neck. They had had their fill of his challenges to their authority; they were especially weary of having to stand aside as others flocked to him. “See,” they had mumbled to one another as they watched the crowds gather around him, “We can do nothing. The whole world has gone after him.” And so, soon, he was taken to trial before the religious court, convicted of blasphemy in the court of Caiaphas, the high priest of the temple in Jerusalem. Then he was taken to Pilate’s headquarters, the seat of civil power in that part of the mighty Roman Empire, where again he was tried and convicted, though Pilate never ceased to be puzzled.

“So, you are a king?”

“You say that I am,” the prisoner answered enigmatically. “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.”

Who do you say that he is? The church this Sunday says that Christ is king. We change the color of the paraments from the green of ordinary time to white, the color of omnipotence, purity and innocence in celebration of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We sing grand hymns:

*All Hail the power of Jesus' name,
Let angels prostrate fall,
Bring forth the royal diadem
And crown him Lord of all.*

We say that he is king today. But what do we mean when we say it? The one who is crucified with the sign “King of the Jews” over his cross underwent great suffering. He was rejected. He was killed. He descended into hell, we say in the Apostles’ Creed. How can we point to him as the one who is crowned with many crowns?

One thing we mean to say always is that in his resurrection, Jesus triumphed over sin and death, over the powers and principalities that appear to rule the world. But just as certainly, we find it a challenge of the highest order to imagine how it was that out of such an ignominious ending, a great cosmic victory could have been accomplished. How can we understand the kind of power that lies behind such an inverse victory?

For 2,000 years, the matter of the lordship of Christ has been a puzzlement for the church and a notion that is completely alien in most of the cultures in which the church has functioned, including our own. Mostly, people like their victories straight-up, in the good, old-fashioned sense of winning. People want to be on the winning side. I know I do. I played a few board games over the Thanksgiving holiday with a couple of friends. I won. I liked it.

Our daughter has given us some DVD’s of a television show that Al and I missed the first time around, called “Friday Night Lights”. It’s about the Dillon Texas Panthers, a football team, and their coach, Coach Taylor. There are the guys, and there are the girlfriends, and the whole deal is about winning. Yet, in the first show of the first season, the handsome quarterback is tackled, and his back is broken. Winning, losing. How does it all go together?

Reformed theologian William Placher offers this reflection: “Most people, in cultures where Christianity has been the dominant influence, assume they know what the word ‘God’ means. Whether or not they believe in God . . . they do have an idea of God that tends to center on power. God is all-powerful, omnipotent, in charge. . . Even the classic conundrums posed about God - if God is God, why is there evil - take God’s power for granted as central to the setting of the problem.” But, Placher

reminds us, “The Christian gospel starts its understanding of God from a very different place.” (1) Christianity begins with a God who descends from heaven to earth, who wears a crown, but it is a crown of thorns. During the lifetime of this God with us, whom we call Jesus, “God wanders with no place to rest his head and washes the feet of his disciples like a servant.”

“My kingdom,” Jesus said to Pilate, “is not of this world.” The world, like Pilate, has a hard time conceiving of a realm in which the source of power is not power as we think of it at all, but exactly the opposite - power that is released in complete powerlessness, what we call vulnerable love. In Christ Jesus, that God put down all the accoutrements of power and took on the mantle of sacrifice. He went all the way to the cross.

This is the hardest aspect of Christianity to understand. From the Crusades to the latest triumphalist TV evangelist, the point has usually been triumph for triumph’s sake. I read recently about churches that are growing around the country, the non-denominational churches. The new trend is to remove the cross from the sanctuary, because it offends people. People want a Christ who has ascended into heaven. They do not want to hear about the Christ who was crucified, dead, and buried - the one who bound up the broken-hearted and ate with outcasts and gave his life for the sins of the world. And yet we know, don’t we, down deep in our souls, that there is a kingdom beyond the kingdoms of this world, and that there is one who reigns there, whose power is made perfect in weakness, a kingdom where the least are considered right alongside the greatest. The one who reigns is acquainted with all our grief.

A friend of mine tells a story of meeting with planners for a large evangelical conference in the early 1970s, a conference called “A Celebration of Evangelism.” “The choice of the word ‘celebration’ was no accident. The planners wanted the conference to be positive and upbeat. . .” There were several planning meetings, “blue sky meetings,” they were called. At one of the last planning meetings, a minister from Chicago interrupted the conversation and said, “I have in my congregation, a 30 year old man just diagnosed with melanoma, and before I flew to this meeting, a couple I had been counseling for two years told me they were giving up and filing for divorce. Five young men in my congregation are in Vietnam, fighting, one of whom is my son. I hope that by the end of this conference I will be celebrating with you, but if you think I am celebrating now, you are wrong.”(2)

It is not that Jesus was unable to triumph over sin and death, but he did it in a way that you and I can barely imagine. He won by losing. He went through the valleys that you and I have to traverse. The One “who was before all things, the one in whom all

things hold together, the first-born from the dead, the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” reconciled all things, not by triumph, but by “the blood of the cross,” as Paul writes. Before there was the white of purity and supremacy, there was red, the color of the blood of the cross.

In Jesus, we see the human face of God, and if that is so, then there are tremendous implications for how you and I might want to be human ourselves. One of those implications is that perhaps we are most human not when we are trying to control everything that happens, but when we are willing to let go and give of ourselves in service and in generosity to others.

It might mean that we become most human when we are willing to take a risk for the sake of others. One thing I admire so much about Jesus is that he just went ahead and did what he believed to be the right thing and was willing to accept the consequences of rejection. I wonder if anyone here ever just had to go ahead and do the right thing, knowing that it would cost you something. And sure enough, it did. But are you sorry? No, because you are a citizen of a kingdom that is not of this world, and because you serve a Savior who came to reveal the truth. Jesus cared less about what other people thought than he did about what his heavenly Father thought.

I’ll never forget a young friend who had grown up in an alcoholic home, sharing with me a gem of wisdom she had picked up at an Al-Anon meeting. She said, “Joanna, I’ve learned that what other people think of me is just not my business.” The effectiveness, the success of what we do is not our business either. Some of the victories in my own life have turned out not to be quite so well, and some of the most difficult and heart-breaking things that have happened to me have turned out to be the anvil on which God was making me into a new creation, a stronger person, a more mature human being.

I love a little book by a theologian named Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics*. I recommend it heartily. She begins with these words, “To speak of God that is what I would like to do and where I always fail.” Of course, her writing is wonderful; it would give John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth cause for envy. She tells the truth in what she says - We try and we fail. We win and we lose, and sometimes it is hard to tell the difference. None of us, finally, can identify with a Savior who always wins. Certainly, not the millions of people in the world who are deemed losers, the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and even those of us who sometimes come out seemingly ahead.

Can you identify with a swaggeringly successful Savior? As a friend, as a wife, as a parent, I sometimes get it right, but sometimes I don't. I think of the simple matter of human mortality, and how it is that through wonders of medicine we are able to take our stand against illness and achieve great victories. But one day everyone of us will encounter the mortal foe that neither science nor positive thinking will be able to subdue. I am convinced that only a God who has known defeat and death can help us then.

Dorothee Soelle describes an experience she had when she was a young student. She was walking down the street and passed a construction site. There was a young man standing close to the sidewalk. She asked, "Do you happen to know what time it is?"

He answered, "Who do you think I am, Jesus?" She said at the time, she was speechless, but as she thought about the man's question to her, she realized that he understood Jesus to be a heavenly being, someone from another world who had nothing to do with us, an omniscient, floating figure. But that is not the God we know in Jesus Christ, the one who came to dwell on earth with us, who came to share our sufferings, then after enduring the worst that life can do defeated all the powers, the principalities, everything that would separate us from God and from one another. (3)

I am thankful this Sunday after Thanksgiving for the blood of the cross. I need it because I cannot save myself. Maybe you can, but I cannot. I need a Savior who will go all the way for us. I am thankful that I serve a church that is not a power church but a servant church. We are not ever going to be triumphant here. We are going to keep trying to be disciples of a Savior who gave his all.

"So you are a king," Pilate asked the prisoner who stood before him.

In church today, we dare to say, "Yes, he is the king," sensing that somewhere deep down in his self-giving love lies the way to our own wholeness, our own victory, our own salvation. To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

(1) William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

(2) Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, Lima, Ohio, CSS Publishing Company, 1995, pp. 96-97.

(3) Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics*, London, Mowbray, 1995, pp.88-89.