

Last Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 29, Year B, 2009

John 18:33-37

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In the John's Gospel today, the Roman governor, Pilate, asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews. For the Church, Jesus is more than king of the Jews; he is king of heaven and earth, and he rules for eternity. Many Christians celebrate this Sunday as the Feast Day of Christ the King. All churches following the lectionary read these lessons, even if for them this Sunday is the Last Sunday after Pentecost and nothing more.

Kings and kingdoms are a strange thing to Americans, although we tend to be fascinated by foreign royalty. But politically, we are republican, not in terms of political party but in how we think governments ought to be structured. We want a president and a congress, not a royal family. Yet with Christ, we identify ourselves as part of a kingdom. Our spiritual head-of-state is Christ the King. When we are baptized into his death and resurrection we are invited to join him in that kingdom and become members of his royal family, too, because by our baptism we become children of God by adoption, fellow heirs with Christ of the Kingdom of God. We are invited to this very participation by the one who came to the Kingdom through his death on the Cross. We are invited to take up his Cross through sacrifice and service. We are invited to join him in his royalty.

But, what is this kingdom of our God? Certainly it is not like any kingdom on earth has been or ever will be. At least in the days when this gospel was written, and throughout most of civilized history, most kings have ruled by the authority of power and force. Christ has never ruled through power and force. He has only ruled by love. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingship is not of this world. Were my kingship of this world, my servants would fight to maintain my authority." The power of Jesus Christ derives from service and it is a power grounded in self-sacrifice, humility and totally unselfish love. He who is Lord of all is also servant of all.

If we would join Christ in the kingdom that our baptism offers us, we can only join him by becoming a servant of Christ in this world, and we become a servant of Christ by serving others in his name. We are called to serve the broken, the hungry, the sick, the friendless and the scorned. And to serve them, we must become one with them, at least in our empathy, because this is what Christ Jesus did. And in doing this, we will raise them into dignity, not by conforming them to the standards of the world, but by loving them with unconditional love. We are called to a love that accepts the ostracized, the impoverished, the marginalized as fellow humans, who by their very creation are endowed with dignity. As citizens of God's Kingdom we must not allow the world to set that dignity aside.

When we study the life of Christ, when we look at the gospel teachings, we do not see Christ degrading others, or condemning others; we do not see him imposing his authority with his might. He rules by the authority of his love. This love made him king. This love redeems us and brings us into the kingdom of God. *Amen.*