

John 18: 33-37, Rev. 1: 4b-8 King of What

On this last Sunday of year B in the lectionary cycle, we again leave the gospel of Mark for the very different gospel of John. From the first verse, John narrates a more poetical and image filled view of Jesus and his life. It is also the most theologically developed account that we have. John's gospel opens with "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God". As we enter Advent next Sunday we will be preparing for a narration with a different beginning...we will be hearing about genealogies and prophecies that will lead to a small village in Judea called Bethlehem. As poet Ann Weems states we will be on our way to kneel in Bethlehem. This lectionary passage comes from the end of John's narrative, today we are at the trial of Jesus before Pilate. We often encounter this same passage during the season of Lent as we prepare for the resurrection. So why do we find this account of Jesus' trial before Pilate here at this point in the church year? We are getting ready to begin focusing on Jesus' arrival among us, on the incarnation and/or the second coming. We are not really wanting to think about the reality of the cross that lies in the future for this infant. Yet that reality was the culmination of Jesus' life among us. Somehow in the reality of the cross, Jesus redeems humanity. In the passage from Revelation which I read, it gives a description of Christ as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." (Rev. 1:5) Christ is the one who loves us and frees us from our sins by his blood, and according to John of Patmos, "made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father." Christ, through his life, death and resurrection has made us into a kingdom of which he is the ruler. These references, as well as the apocalyptic vision from Daniel are easy to connect to the theme of kingship. In the passage from John, Jesus refers to a kingdom which belongs to him. So in many ways that we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today forms a bookend to the story we have told all year; the story which we will begin telling again next week. How do we understand this idea of kingship? What do the verses from the gospel of John which describes this interaction of Pilate and Jesus tell us about Christ's kingdom? If you read the entire transcript so to speak of the trial, it is set up as a drama with seven scenes. Pilate goes back and forth between the Jewish religious leaders who remain outside and Jesus who is the prisoner within Pilate's headquarters. The first scene of this drama contains the accusation that Jesus is a criminal. The second scene is our passage this morning where the question Pilate asks is, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds to this as he often did by asking Pilate a question of his own. "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate's response is to say that "your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" And that is the question we need to ask ourselves. What are the things Jesus has done and asked his followers to do that has made him so dangerous to the way of the world then and now? Why have the God-experts of the day been so offended that they hand him over to the secular power of Rome to be killed? What is so dangerous about feeding the hungry, reaching out to the Samaritans and healing those on the margins of society? Jesus has spent most of his ministry on the fringes with people on the edges of culture, yet it has caught the attention of those highest up in the established institutions of temple and town hall. Why do they care what this guy from that obscure place Nazareth does? It's not like those who are following him are powerful movers

and shakers. Those closest to him are fishermen and tax collectors. The crowds gathering around him are the lowest of the low after all—lepers, blind beggars, known law breakers, children and their desperate parents.

After all, there have been many wandering healers claiming to be the Messiah before him. Why not just ignore him? Because this time the claim is true. Jesus is not the only one proclaiming this as the truth. John the Baptist, Nathanael, the woman at the well and all her Samaritan friends have declared this truth that they have experienced in their encounter with Jesus. There were the 5000 who were fed who then clamored to make him king. The Pharisees are nervous because “many of the people have believed him.” The man blind from birth, that sinner to whom Jesus gave sight is emboldened to chastise the official religious authorities who question him. Clearly, someone greater than an itinerant healer is present among them and the order of things is being upended in this Jesus’ wake. Things have not really changed that much since then. Then as now, when change is afoot, those for whom the current set-up is working are certain to try and stop it. And Jesus’ kingship is the biggest, most radical change ever called for. The reign of King Jesus makes the first the last and the last first. The meek inherit the earth. To be the greatest you must not just relate to the least but become one among them. This King washes feet. This King has taken the form of a servant. This King showed that the strongest power in the world is that of love willing to risk suffering and even death for the sake of the beloved. This king, who is unafraid of any earthly king, who is the faithful witness to the one who is, who was and will always be, must be silenced or the world will be turned upside down. These things answer Pilate’s question about what Jesus has done to so disturb the authorities. These things which we are also called to do and be are the signs of the reign of God within us. However, Jesus does not answer Pilate’s question about his actions, but instead seems to go back to the previous question about kingship. Verse 36: “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’” This statement is one which seems to disavow Jesus’ connection to this worldly kingdom of which both Pilate and his accusers are a part. Jesus is asserting his independence—that this world and its powers ultimately cannot determine his fate. This world cannot hold him without his consent. John 10: 18: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” This is certainly true, but perhaps there is a deeper concept for us here. John of Patmos declared that Jesus came to be the faithful witness of God. Jesus is also saying here that if he and his followers were of this world, then naturally they would use the primary tool that this world provides for establishing and maintaining power: violence. But Jesus is not of this world and so Jesus will not defend himself though violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God’s kingdom by violence. Jesus will make no followers by violence. Instead, Jesus has come to witness to the truth, the truth that God is love. Because we have not seen God, we have a hard time imagining God. Because we have not seen God, our imaginations are dominated by our experiences which come from this world of violence. But Jesus is not of this world. Jesus came to show us that God’s grace and acceptance are offered unconditionally to all—even those we despise. We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. And the end result of that view is death. If we no longer belong to the world around us but are instead members of

the kingdom of Christ the King, what does that mean in how we live our lives? This is an important question in the wake of the events which have dominated the attention of the world these last weeks—the violence of the terrorist attacks and the reactions we have to them. In a time when the world turns more violent, how do we follow Christ our King as priests and servants of God? We are a week away from the tragedy that occurred in Paris, but the violence which led to the overwhelming number of people fleeing that same terrorism has not abated. Indeed, the tragedy that occurred in Paris, in Mali, in Bagdad, in so many places will probably be repeated again. But as followers of the one we claim as king, as ones belonging to his kingdom—do we let violence win? In this understanding of our call to be different from the world, how do we demonstrated God’s abundant love so that violence and hate cannot stand against its truth. Our ultimate loyalty is to Jesus and to His Way and Truth, Light and Life, Grace and Word. This means looking around us and seeing those who are in need; those who are on the margins and fringes, those who have been exploited and oppressed. It means taking risks and using resources for them so that hate and violence have no place to breed. It means living in Christ’s kingdom, even within this world. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.