

The Prince and the King

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Crozet United Methodist Church

Christ the King Sunday - November 22, 2009

John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" 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." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine public servant and political theorist who lived from 1469 to 1527, and who is best known for a treatise he wrote in 1513, but that was published five years after his death called *The Prince*. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli describes methods that an aspiring prince can use to acquire the throne, or that an existing prince can use to maintain his reign.¹

Machiavelli lived during a time of great political turmoil in Florence, and *The Prince* reflects his belief in the importance of a stable state, where for the prince, the ends justify the means, as long as the prince's actions keep the prince in power and maintain the stability of the state. Therefore, it is more important for a prince to be *perceived* as merciful, frank, faithful, humane, and religious, but he cannot actually *have* these qualities, because at time he will have to act against them. Likewise, the prince is better being feared than loved, because commitments made in fear are kept in adversity, unlike commitments made in times of peace. If the prince leads his own army, he must observe cruelty in order to command the absolute

¹ Wikipedia, "The Prince."

respect of his soldiers. He should only keep his word when it suits his purposes.² It sort of reads like the opposite of 1 Corinthians 13; no self-giving love, no self-sacrifice, simply an ethic of pure pragmatism, where the ends seem to always justify the means, as long as they always work to the advantage of the prince.

This is, of course a study in contrast with where we are in the liturgical year. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of our liturgical calendar, which begins anew each year on the first Sunday of Advent. and in it, as seems to always be the case on this day each year, we find Jesus in the most unregal of situations. Yet, on this Sunday, we consider what it means to call Jesus our king and, in doing so, to understand ourselves as his subjects. What we find on this day is seldom what we expect from a king, something evidenced by the fact that this Sunday's readings always seem to involve Jesus and the cross.

In this morning's text, we find Jesus before Pontius Pilate, on trial for his life. Before I read this text, I want to say a couple of things about Pilate. The first is that Pontius Pilate was not the hand wringing ninny that he is portrayed as in the movies, a genuinely good man caught in a matter of conscience between the Roman law he has sworn to uphold and the mob crying out for the blood of Jesus and his own sense that Jesus is an innocent man. Pilate, we are led to believe, only crucifies Jesus because he has no choice, only does so against his better judgment.

The historical record gives us a different image of the man. Pilate was the governor of the Roman province of Judea, which included Judea, where Jerusalem was located. His duties included things like administration, collecting taxes, some limited judicial duties, as well as, perhaps most importantly, keeping the peace in Jerusalem. Pilate normally lived in Caesarea, but traveled throughout the province for work, and was always expected to be in Jerusalem during Passover to keep the peace. Passover was a time when Jewish messianic fervor was at its peak, and he was to suppress any thought of uprising by any means necessary, including violent force.

Pilate had run-ins with the Jews in Judea before, people who were so strictly monotheistic that they protested any Roman idols brought into their midst. The ancient Jewish

² Ibid.

historian Josephus wrote of Pilate “another time he used the sacred treasure of the temple, called corban, to pay for bringing water into Jerusalem by an aqueduct. A crowd came together and clamored against him; but he had caused soldiers dressed as civilians to mingle with the multitude, and at a given signal they fell upon the rioters and beat them so severely with staves that the riot was quelled.” Roughly three years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Pilate suppressed what he thought may have been a Samaritan uprising with so much force that he was recalled to Rome to answer for it, which also happens to be when he disappears from history. (WP)

I believe Mr. Machiavelli would have approved.

If this were a Hollywood movie, this scene would be the climax. Jesus has triumphantly entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, with the people cheering his name. Did you ever wonder why they were cheering? Do you think it was because they were expecting some healings or some miracles involving food and drink? No! They are cheering because they believe this is going to be the climax of the story as well. Jesus is going to march into that city and tell Pilate who is boss! He is going to go into that holy city and throw out the occupiers. He is going to walk right up to the seat of power pull those posers off their thrones, and *then* the real king will take over, and then we will see who oppresses whom!

This is it! This is the climax! This is the denouement! Start up the landing vehicles! Open up the Trojan horse! Blow up the Death Star! Saddle up! Lock and load! Run into that phone booth and put on the tights with the big red *S!* It's a coup d'etat! The *real* king is here! The mighty king is here! The all-powerful king is here!

The problem is that the all-powerful king is before Pilate, bound, betrayed, and abandoned by those closest to him, handed over by his own nation, in Pilate's praetorium which was considered to be ritually unclean. And no one is cheering for him now. At least, not in a good way. And you can almost hear the sarcasm dripping from the lips of Pilate the oppressor as he says, “So, *you* are a king?”

We want bolts of lightening. We want vengeance. We want the *real* king to ascend to his throne. How many times are we like this in our lives? If Jesus would just give us a great act

of kingship; if he would just smite someone; if he would just exhibit some great Machiavellian example of power. If he would just act like a *king*.

And then we remember that this king is Jesus. This is the Jesus who looks at Pilate and says, "My kingdom is not from this world... 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." For Jesus, the truth includes the sacrificing of oneself and losing one's life for the sake of one's subjects. For Jesus, the truth includes serving the God of love over this world's gods of greed and self-interest. For Jesus, kingship means advancing the cause of love in the world, even at great cost, not advancing one's own agenda or political platform. Jesus makes it clear that he stands before Pontius Pilate, stands before worldly power on his own accord, by his own power. Jesus stands before Pilate on his *own* authority.

At the end of the trial, when Jesus is handed over to be crucified, Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders think that the moment of judgment on Jesus has finally arrived, that his silly notion of "kingship" has come to an end. Yet it is not the moment of Jesus' judgment, but theirs. Nor is it the end of Jesus' kingship, but the prelude to his exaltation and final "enthronement," and enthronement which for *this* king, takes place not in a place, but on the cross.³

There are times when we wish Jesus our King would behave a little more Machiavellian, especially when someone has wronged us. The summer before my senior year of high school, which was also the summer before my brother's sophomore year, we thought it would be fun to get a job working together, especially since I could drive and he couldn't. This was harder than it sounds. There were many teenagers in that part of Richmond, and the good jobs went fast. We felt fortunate to have found a job working in food service in a three-story nursing home in the far West End. The pay, of course, was terrible, but it wasn't fast food, and we did not have to work nights.

Our job was simply to take trays of food prepared in the basement, load them into large carts, take the carts to the first floor, and serve all the residents in the dining hall. We then repeated this for the dining halls on the other two floors. By the time we finished the third floor,

³ "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville.

it was time to bus the tables on the first floor, which we did, taking the dirty dishes back to the kitchen to be cleaned by the rest of the staff.

The problem was that the rest of the staff did not see a point in cleaning the dishes. They were more observational in their approach to work. This meant that the two of us would bring three floors of dirty dishes back to the basement and clean them ourselves. We would have complained to our boss Mary, the director of the foodservice program, however, we had noticed that she often had a propensity to clock in and then go shopping for a couple of hours. We weren't sure that conversation would do us much good.

After a while, we began to see an upside to the way things were downstairs. We noticed that the residents were lonely and wanted company. Sometimes they wanted someone to tell about the visit they had just had or someone to look at their family portrait and see their children and grandchildren. Michael and I were happy to oblige; we weren't exactly pressed for time. We even did things to make the people laugh, like sing silly songs and decorate our paper hats we were required to wear to make them look like World War II fighter planes. Still, day after day we worked those plates as fast as we could. Day after day, we encouraged the other employees to join us. Day after day, nothing changed.

One afternoon when we arrived for our shift, Mary called us into her office. She told us that we were a problem. She told us that we were not working hard enough; that we were cutting up, singing and drawing on our hats. She accused us of not taking the job seriously, especially my very hardworking brother. After she gave her litany of complaints about us, she looked at me and asked what I had to say for myself. I said, "What I have to say for myself is that I quit."

She looked at Michael, "And you?"

"Me too," he said.

"I really think that is best," she said. She was going to fire us anyway.

To be fired for laziness by someone who clocks in and then leaves to go run personal errands. The good jobs are all taken. Now what are we going to do?

Later that year, the phone rang in my dormitory room. It was my brother, calling from home, telling me that he was leaving track practice that day when he remembered a book he

needed out of his locker. He walked from the locker room, across the commons area, and to the section of the school containing the lockers of the juniors. As he entered this empty section of the school, he saw a custodian bending down, picking up the students' trash out of the hallways and the restrooms left behind by the students that day. As she stood, their eyes met. They recognized one another.

It was Mary.

I asked him what he did next, and he told me he just politely passed her, pretending to not recognize her, to not know that she had lost her old job. He went to his locker, retrieved his book, and went home.

He was only able to do this because he was no, and is not, a subject of the prince. He is a subject of the King, the King who shows mercy to his subjects, who left his throne to die for his subjects, so that he might bless his subjects, calling them not subjects, but friends, sisters and brothers, and who calls his friends to go into all the world to invite those still living under the boot of all those oppressive princes into *his* Kingdom.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO.