Values of the Kingdom

Rev. Kyle Cuperwich

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Year B, Christ the King, Proper 29
John 18:33-37
Grace Episcopal Church, Pemberton and St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Lumberton, NJ

Today, on this last day of the liturgical year, we are transported to Holy Week and the trial of Jesus. Jesus being put on trial represents an interesting turn of events. The disciples thought that Jesus would be triumphant as he entered Jerusalem; he would overthrow the oppressive Romans and restore Israel to it's rightful place of power in the world. Yet instead, Jesus finds himself in court. The religious leaders did not hail him as the promised Messiah. Rather, they wanted to do him in out of jealousy. Jesus was announcing that he was a king, and that was punishable by death.

Pontius Pilate found himself in a bind. On one hand, the religious leaders wanted Jesus dead, and on the other hand, he wanted to keep the peace and control he had as governor. So, Pilate goes to Jesus and asks bluntly, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus didn't look or act like a king. He had no kingly attire, he didn't use coercion to get his way or demand others to follow him, and he had no grand army around to support him. In fact, he only had twelve poor disciples, one of whom betrayed him. Naturally, Pilate was confused. Jesus was not like any king he had ever seen. Pilate wants to know point blank from Jesus if he was the king of the Jews.

To Pilate inquiry, Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not of this world…If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." He is proclaiming that he is in fact a king but telling Pilate that his values were different. Jesus chose to serve with humility rather than absolute power. When we look at Jesus' life, we see it was rooted in humility. Rather than being born in a palace, he was born in a stable among farm animals. He lived his life as a nomad, spreading the good news of his kingdom and relying on the generosity of others. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a horse, he entered on a lowly donkey. Rather than sitting on a grand throne, he hung from a cross wearing a crown of thorns out of love for his subjects.

So what does this value of humility mean for the church? What does it mean for the body of Christ and the individuals who make up that body? It means that the church is not called to "win" at all costs. The church is not to use coercion or domination over others. Rather, the church is called to win through humble, life-giving service; a humility that is displayed in Jesus' work and a giving of life as seen in the cross. It is an upside-down kingdom where tradition and culture are turned on their head. It is a kingdom where authority is not demanded or coerced from power over others, but to use a term coined by pastor and theologian Gregory Boyd, authority comes from a "power under" perspective where the church works from the ground up, serving others in Christ-like love.

Too often, segments of the church try to rely on Cesar, the government of this world, to coerce and demand others live out the gospel. We can see this in the hot button issues of our day, such as abortion

and immigration. Yet when the church uses this “power over” approach rather than “power under,” it fails to connect with the culture. It fails to issue recognize the complexities of human life. It fails to bring hope to the hopeless and fails to respect the dignity of every human being. This Christ the King Sunday we are reminded that we are part of a different kingdom whose symbol is the cross and whose constitution calls us to love and service. Amen.