



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A King For A Different Kind of Kingdom

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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"So you are a king?" You can almost hear the sneer in Pilate's voice. Everyone knew that a king is powerful, with political and military might to prove it. Kings did not appear before him on trial looking like a dirty vagabond. Pilate claims that because he is not a Jew, he has no idea what a Jewish king would look like, after all, they were certainly different from Romans. Perhaps this conquered people had such pitiful kings. But then, his own people were trying to get him nailed to a cross, so what was Pilate to think?

On this Christ the King Sunday, what are we to think? We don't think in terms of kings unless we're watching movies or reading tabloid stories about Prince William and wondering how long he'll have to wait to gain the throne. We Americans got over the king thing in 1776 and now we choose our leader and make sure that they don't stay around too long or have too much power.

We relegate kings and queens to mythic stories: The Lord of the Rings, Return of the King, Camelot, movies about Elizabeth I and II, and Cleopatra. Kings are the players in fairy tales and legends and of course Shakespeare, Richard and Henry, Caesar, Lear, and Macbeth. We usually remember kings that behave badly. It's no wonder that Pilate couldn't imagine that Jesus might be kingly.

I think that there's a bigger disconnect for Pilate and also for us - to understand the king, you have to understand the kingdom. The Roman Empire was vast; it enveloped numerous cultures; it had rules and those living in the Empire were expected to obey them. There was order and it was kept in place with an iron fist. Those who contemplated going up against the Empire knew what it would like when the Empire struck back. What Pilate or really just about everybody didn't get was that Jesus was bringing another kind of empire which would call for a very different kind of leader.

In his book *In Search of Paul*, scholar Dominic Crossan explains the fundamental difference between the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God; the Empire created peace through the power and the Kingdom of God will create peace through justice. In his church planting and subsequent letters to those churches, the Apostle Paul teaches the vision of the kingdom in which everyone is equal; everyone has enough; everyone receives the care and dignity that they deserve. This little fledgling church stood against the strong imperial current of inequality, vast socio-economic disparity, a system that was cruel and careless of those who were weak and small. Power was the ultimate prize and if you were a Roman citizen, you had inherent power. Citizenship was limited to free born men; there were other lesser categories of citizenship for women, slaves who had earned their freedom and those who were citizens of occupied territories. In a conflict, a real Roman citizen would always prevail.

Now contrast this with the understanding of Christ's kingdom as taught by Paul. According to Paul, if you understood that Jesus' invitation was for you and you chose to put your faith in what he said, did and showed, you were "in Christ." All who are in Christ, are equal, regardless of social status, citizenship in Jesus' kingdom is open to all. So when Paul planted a church, rich people would eat

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alongside of slaves, women were given freedom and authority within the church to exercise their gifts and talents as ministries, children were honored with citizenship through baptism. Worldly goods were no longer symbols of success, but opportunities to help one's brothers and sisters in Christ. All were honored equally and expected to contribute to the common good. Paul had little time for those who sought a free ride.

So you can see how ushering in this kind of kingdom would require a king less interested in appearances, less driven by power, more interested in the plight of the poor, more willing to share authority and to empower others and certainly more interested in peace than in war and its great profit margin. Such a king would not look like a power-broker, he might even take the form of a slave. He might be willing to suffer the kinds of things suffered regularly by many of his people - hunger, degradation and even execution.

Pilate and so many of Jesus' contemporaries didn't understand what he was doing, even today after 2000 years of Christianity we are not ready to follow into this strange kingdom with a crucified king. But let's stop for a moment and think what it would look like if we lived in his kingdom.

First, I don't think that workers would have to go on strike in order to be treated fairly. The number one tenet of union organizing is that the best organizer is a bad boss. Imagine if all bosses treated their employees with respect and concern for their welfare. In Jesus' kingdom, there would be no unions because there wouldn't be any need for them. I don't think that people working for successful, thriving Fortune 500 companies would need to be on food stamps to make ends meet. That kind of disrespect and greed just would not be.

In Jesus' kingdom, people would have lives filled with joy and satisfying relationships - we would not be isolating ourselves with gadgets. We would invest our time in each other and as a result, we wouldn't be so depressed and lonely. People would reach out to us when we were hurt or sad - such things would never be experienced alone. And then when things got better, others would celebrate our restoration. Our good fortune would be their reason to celebrate.

Jesus' kingdom is a place of abundance, in which all are satisfied and no one lives in deprivation. The obscene disparity between the rich and the poor would disappear. There would not be one small group of people with more than they need and so many without the necessities. Branford Cares would not even exist because there wouldn't be any need for it. Such a world would be safe and peaceful because in the absence of poverty and want, envy also ceases to be. There would be no need for elaborate security systems because fairness and justice creates security. Martin Luther King was at his most prophetic when he said that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Justice is the centerpiece of Jesus' kingdom.

Imagine a school in which children have no fear of bullies or cities in which you can walk down the street at any hour without fear of crime. It's the same place where people don't have a need to lock their doors. And it's also a place in which things don't matter very much unless they are being shared.

If this sounds almost boring, don't think it because it is also a kingdom of wonder, learning and discovery. Ideas generate exciting conversation which leads to more ideas. Beauty is honored and creativity is celebrated. This is the way humans are meant to be.

Here at Trinity this morning we welcome a new little companion on our journey toward this kingdom of love and peace. We will teach Frankie Mata about this place and hopefully inspire him to help create it. And we will tell him the stories about the most unlikely king.

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