

The King's Loyal Subjects

John 18:33-38

© Stacey Steck

Preached November 22, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

When Jesus saw that [the scribe] answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’

When Jesus heard [the centurion] he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.’

I tell you, this [tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Four individuals encountering Jesus, four individuals receiving words of divine favor we'd all like to hear. Maybe you have heard some of these stories about people of common, or perhaps uncommon, faith, people who are remembered through the ages as Jesus points them out to us as examples of faith and practice. To my knowledge, none of them have ever been canonized; none of them even have names; they are simply the slave, the scribe, the centurion, and the tax collector, and they are known to us because each of them, in their own small or desperate way, revealed something about the kingdom of God, about the nature of that kingdom, about the truth of that Kingdom.

Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” and it is painfully obvious that he had never met the slave, the scribe, the centurion, or the tax collector, for, in each of them, he would have met the truth when he met them. What was it Jesus said to Pilate?

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” These were four individuals who had listened to Jesus’ voice, and had shown in themselves God’s truth. Pilate is hearing with his ears, but not with his heart. The truth stands right in front of him, speaking directly to him, but still he does not listen to the voice, still he hears no truth. Pilate may have considered himself a loyal servant of the Emperor back in Rome, but he was far from being a loyal subject of the King of heaven and earth. For it is those who reflect God’s truth, like the slave, the scribe, the centurion, the tax collector, and our own Paul and Barbara Bergsma, who are the truly loyal subjects of the King, the King we celebrate on this Christ the King Sunday.

Make no mistake, this is not a memorial service for Paul and Barb, but rather an opportunity to read the Bible in the light of people we actually know in addition to those of Jesus’ own time. Like the four Biblical characters, neither Paul nor Barbara has been canonized, at least not yet, but neither do they go unnamed. We may not have witnessed any of the special moments of their lives, the kind Jesus noticed and commented upon in each of those Gospel episodes, but we have seen, in our interactions with them, that they do indeed reflect God’s truth, living their lives in such a way as to honor their king, according to both the letter, and more importantly, the spirit of the law. They are not perfect, but they have shown us the perfection of their king. They are not gods, but they have revealed our God. No, tonight is not a memorial service for the Bergsmas, but rather a celebration of their gifts, presence, and ministry. Nevertheless, it would not be with false modesty, but rather an

appropriate understanding of the Bible, that they would gently remind us not to confuse the King with his subjects.

Christ the King Sunday celebrates one of the three primary roles of Jesus Christ, that of sovereign ruler of all creation. I can't tell you why there is no Christ the Prophet Sunday, nor Christ the Priest Sunday, to name the other two roles, but I guess you can have only so many special Sundays a year in the church calendar. But on this final Sunday before Advent, we give thanks to God for Christ and his kingdom, affirming, in the words of an Anglican prayer, "As king he claims dominion over all your creatures, that he may bring before your infinite majesty a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace." That description is a far cry from many, if not most, of the kings, or rulers of any kind, with whom we may be familiar, Biblical or otherwise. It is all too clearly seen that not all kings should be followed with unfailing loyalty. We need only look at the stories of our own Bible to see a long list of the kings of even God's chosen people who were unworthy of even modest amounts of fealty. Of how many kings is it said, "He did evil in the sight of the Lord, as his ancestors had done?" Rare is the good king in the Old Testament. Rarer still is a good king or ruler in the New Testament era, a fact which may have given rise to the Church's desire to label Jesus their King, their longings for a rule and a "kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace," unfulfilled for so long.

Indeed, this is precisely why we continue to celebrate Christ the King Sunday, for we seem to be no closer to that Kingdom despite the years and efforts of so many faithful people. And so we continue to hope, not in vain for some earthly leader to fulfill our hopes, but in gratitude that despite evidence to the contrary, Jesus is ruler of all. It is not, as some say, that there are two kingdoms in conflict with one another; there is only one kingdom. Rather, it is that the Kingdom of Christ is under siege -- occupied, so to speak -- by forces of evil and suffering, and every so often we catch a glimpse of those virtues and values of the Kingdom of Christ, and we celebrate. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "Enemy-occupied territory - that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful King has landed, you might say in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in His great campaign of sabotage." Yes, the King has landed, he is here, even if he is not photographed behind a microphone or the barrel of a gun. It is not that the King is absent, hiding in a cave somewhere in Afghanistan, but that the King goes unseen amongst us in the lives and faces of his loyal subjects who, as Lewis says, "take part in His great campaign of sabotage," living and loving as Christ did when he was seen in his own flesh.

Last Sunday, during the Time with Young Disciples, British Embassy vice-consul Sheila Pacheco commented to the children that in a sense, during the Second World War, even those citizens not serving in the armed forces were, in their own way, soldiers in the fight, providing invaluable support and backup, not only in factories, but everywhere life was still lived in the midst of war. As uncomfortable as

these military images may be for us, there is no such discomfort for the purveyors of violence and suffering who are occupying God's sacred space. They are working overtime to claim this kingdom as their own, to lay waste to its beauty and truth. Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from here," and that is right; it is not *from* here. But it is here, and it is worth fighting for, and its king is worthy to follow, worth being loyal to, and the sabotage must go on, life must be lived, and beauty must be shared, and books must be written and read and passed on, and homes must be opened in hospitality, and travelers must be seen safely home, and the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ must work together for good in this Kingdom.

I expect, later this evening when we are sharing our best wishes to Paul and Barbara, that there will be many stories told of their acts of sabotage on behalf of the true Kingdom. Many bible commentators have suggested that Pilate's motivation for finally turning Jesus over to be crucified was fear: fear of the Jews, fear of riots in Jerusalem, fear of the Emperor, and they are probably right. I doubt he was actually afraid of Jesus himself. But he should have been afraid of Jesus, and his loyal subjects like Paul and Barbara Bergsma. Indeed he would surely have been afraid if he had read these words from former ECFers Karen and Gustavo: "Our thoughts and prayers are with you on this special occasion. For our family, Paul and Barbara have 'been' ECF!! Their loving hands received us into the fold and showed us the love and light of Christ. Blessings on them as they make this transition to whatever the LORD has prepared for them here in the US." How much more loyal, and subversive,

can we be than to receive others “into the fold” and show them the “love and light of Christ?”

Without a leader worth loyalty, there is no true loyalty. Oh sure, there are people who follow blindly someone unworthy, but their delusion should not be confused with the truth. People follow bad leaders for all the wrong reasons, but their following doesn't make their leader worthy of their loyalty. The annals of history are filled with stories of gullible people and their unworthy leaders. Thirty-one years ago last Wednesday, more than nine hundred people in Jonestown, Guyana proved that delusion is often more powerful than the truth to which Jesus came to testify, as they committed mass suicide together at the command of their unworthy leader. But our God is worthy, a worth shown in the cross and resurrection, a worth shown in the fruits of Christ's disciples, a worth experienced in the power of the Holy Spirit. What we celebrate tonight in Paul and Barbara is not their acts of sabotage, but the God who put them up to it, and who is worthy of their, and our, loyalty, and who called not only Paul and Barbara into being and faith and service, but who calls each of us to be the King's loyal subjects. May we each be counted as the King's loyal servant reclaiming that kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace. Amen.