

“So You Say” – Christ The King – Nov 26/06

In some ways in this year of struggles in the Middle East it seems appropriate that we would end the church year looking at a long-ago struggle in the Middle East. There are actually several struggles going on at this point in John's gospel. Prior to the scene we encounter Jesus has been confronted by the religious authorities in the form of Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the “high priest that year” as John puts it. That confrontation was highly unsuccessful from Annas' point of view, who then bundled Jesus off to his son-in-law Caiaphas. John gives us few details about that subsequent episode with Caiaphas, only that Jesus was dragged off to Pilate's headquarters early in the morning.

Who was this Pilate? Well, these days it's perhaps easiest to see him as a Puppet Prime Minister representing the world's superpower Empire in an occupied country – but we won't mention any names. Pilate had a great deal of “official” authority, backed by all the military might of his ruling superpower at his command. Truthfully, however, he was desperately trying to keep the lid on the occupied land, dealing with terrorist attacks against the occupying Roman soldiers, and trying to establish a local governing council that would operate just like back in the home states of the Empire. That local government was a troubled mixture of appointments by Rome (that's what John's tongue-in-cheek remark about the “high priest that year” is about – that was a position usually held for life, but Rome's interference was seen even in such a position) and religious leaders who derived their power from local custom and practice – not to mention their private militias.

Pilate, for all his apparent power, is pictured by John as a somewhat pathetic figure, shuttling back and forth between Jesus and the religious leaders, sometimes shouting out his authority, and being thoroughly confused and frustrated by the rabbi-like responses from Jesus. The tension between Pilate and the religious authorities builds, and Jesus is increasingly caught in the midst of a struggle between state and church, although he stands aloof and above it all.

Being caught in a struggle between church and state is a situation to which Christians across the ages can easily relate. From being blamed for causing such catastrophes as the burning of Rome and even the collapse of the Empire, through the oppressive centuries of the Holy Roman Empire when the distinction between church and state had completely blurred - King or Pope, who could tell? – through the reformation, counter-reformation and resulting inquisitions, Puritan purges and witch-hunts, Christians needed to be exceedingly conscious and wary of who was grasping for power at the moment, of who was determined to tell them what to do and how to live their lives. That tradition of church and state struggling for control over people, and the authority to tell people how to live continues to this very day.

When we see how the struggle between church authorities and government for power over people seems to be an endless battle, it might be easy to become discouraged. A lot of people have become discouraged, and lost faith, and dropped out of the struggle. Interest and involvement in both church and government have sunk to all-time lows in North America, and in much of the civilized world. Disillusionment with distortions of the truth and even outright lies from both sides of the conflict have caused people to distrust both the church and the government, to become disillusioned and to turn away from both.

Mercifully, while this ongoing struggle between church and state might seem to be inevitable, we see from Jesus' response to Pilate that there is indeed hope for us. Far from being a pawn of either Pilate or Caiaphas, John shows us a Jesus who stands not just resigned to and aloof from the struggle, but powerfully above and beyond it. “Are you a king?” Pilate asks, and Jesus replies, “So you say.” Moreover, “My kingdom does not receive its power from this world”, Jesus tells Pilate, who cannot begin to understand that answer because his whole life has been spent grasping for earthly-based power. And this is where we are caught up in the tension of this dramatic encounter. We sit on the

sidelines, watching and hearing it unfold, and we hear Jesus' answer, and we see Pilate's confusion, and we are twitching like children in Grade 2 waving our hands and saying, "I know, I know, pick me!" Because where Pilate doesn't understand Jesus' answer, we do. It's true, we have the advantage of knowing how it all turned out, but we're caught up in the tension just the same. When Jesus tells Pilate, "I came to testify to the truth, and every one who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" we twitch with excitement because we know the truth of that statement.

We know how Pilate, powerful in earthly terms, was himself a pawn in the events that led to Jesus' death on the cross. We know also the truth of Jesus' statements of heavenly power: "I am the resurrection and the life", "the Father and I are one", "I will ask our Father in heaven to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit", a power confirmed in his rising again from the tomb, and his ascending into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, reigning victorious over all powers on earth and in heaven. The power of Jesus, confirmed in his victory even over death, is so incredibly superior to the meager power of Pilate and Caiaphas that we can almost feel sorry for their misplaced arrogance, and that they were in truth powerless in their roles of sending Jesus to the death that could not hold him.

But we have to be careful here. As we observe that Pilate and Caiaphas being powerless in their roles, it would be too easy to misunderstand that the suffering of all people who were crushed under the fights for power between church and the government were somehow a deliberate act of God. It would be too easy and too wrong to say that such suffering, pain, grief and hardship of people were all just details in some "perfect" plan of God. It would be wrong, because assuming such a plan robs them of their meaning and worth as people, and denies any mercy and grace of God.

It was necessary that Jesus would suffer and die, and Pilate, Caiaphas, Annas, and even the mobs yelling "crucify him" did have the earthly power to accomplish that task. It was necessary, because only through his suffering and death could Jesus so dramatically display his holy power through rising again from death.

It was not, however, necessary that people should suffer and die in conflicts between church and state. It is instead tragic and sad, because since we are given the freedom to choose how we will live, whether in response to God's calling or in response to the world's temptations of apparent power, some people will surrender to the lures of this world, and others will get trampled in their grasping for power. Whether the struggles and conflicts and outright wars are over oil, gold, diamonds, water, food, land, sheep, cattle, slaves, or just plain power over others in the name of God, people of all stripes, including and sometimes especially those identifying themselves as Christians, with great deliberation and intent do trample all over the rights of others, and abuse, oppress, enslave and even kill those who get in their way.

Above all this conflict, oppression and abuse stands Jesus, not just aloof from the struggle as if indifferent to it, but above it, uncorrupted by it, shining as a beacon of light and truth to which those who would listen can turn. A beacon of hope, proclaiming that the path of grasping for power, of destroying countless lives as collateral damage in the conflict for supremacy is not the kind of behaviour to which we are called by God. Jesus stands above the struggle as a pinnacle of truth, demonstrating through his own obedience to God's love, his own sacrifice, the truth of his proclamation that God calls us to love him, and to love one another. Jesus himself represents the truth of God's redeeming love.

The freedom for people to choose whether or not they will respond to God's love, a freedom so gracious because only with such freedom can there be true grace, means that other people - Christians included - are going to continue to get trashed in ongoing struggles for earthly power. That is a truth. But there is another truth that emerges from the conflict between Pilate and Jesus, and that is the truth, displayed by the power of Jesus in his resurrection, that when all is said and done, when the battles of

this world are over, when each person finally surrenders all earthly power, all those who have heard and responded to Jesus' message of love and service will share with him his victory over all powers below, on and above the earth. Those people who have responded to Jesus' voice by turning away from the lust for earthly power and have turned to loving God and loving each other will ultimately share in his power and victory, and in the life he has in truth promised, a life finally free from pain, from sorrow, from tears, from suffering; a life full of gladness and sharing and sheer raw rejoicing.

In truth I tell you, all those who listen to his voice will share in such a life. Thanks be to God.