

FOURTH SUNDAY OF END TIME: CHRIST THE KING

John 18:33-37

One Christian in Two Kingdoms

In our Holy Gospel, two important men stand before us, one a temporal ruler, one spiritual, one appointed by Caesar, and one the Anointed of God. We see Jesus, the Head of the Church, standing before Pilate, a head of state. Jesus doesn't seek Pilate's throne, and in fact, He even submits to Pilate's earthly judgment, even as we are to submit to our earthly rulers, unless they forbid us to do what God commands or command us to do what God forbids. Here we see the biblical teaching of the two kingdoms, church and state, in practice.

As Christians in America, it is important that we always remember to distinguish between the realm of the church and of the state. The state is the state, and the church is the church, and just as we wouldn't want a politician preaching on Sunday, we shouldn't want a pastor trying to write or enforce secular law. That's why, for instance, I try to keep my politics to myself. You don't see me putting up political signs in the front yard or bumper stickers on my car. I wouldn't want to give the impression that my views are God's views. Just as there are red states and blue states in the United States, so there can be red pews and blue pews in the sanctuary. We dare not let political differences disturb the unity we have in the gospel and in the true teaching of Scripture.

Are there issues where the Christian will necessarily have views informed by his or her faith? Certainly abortion comes to mind, and there are other issues like it, no doubt. But even in this regard, we must be careful to argue our political positions, even those clearly informed by the Faith, through thoughtful appeals to the natural law that governs the affairs of this world. We must not strive to somehow enshrine Scripture as the law of the land, to think be so naïve as to think that the mere emblazoning the Ten Commandments in courtrooms or introduction of prayer into public schools will make our society more Christian. First, do we really want judges and teachers from every religious background under the sun interpreting God's Word in some official capacity or leading our children in prayer to the god of the week? Second, and most importantly, faith cannot be forced. Faith is an individual matter, just as individuals, not nations, are baptized, and it is created not through laws, but through the preaching of the gospel.

If you receive the email devotions, you know we've had a lot of Jeremiah lately. In Jeremiah 29:4-9, the LORD told those who would soon be in exile:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

As citizens of two kingdoms, as those who long for heaven yet dwell now on earth, we do well to take the Lord's advice to heart in our situation, to pray for this land in which we live and seek its welfare, for its welfare is our temporal welfare. Yet at the same time, like those Israelites in exile, we dare also never forget the eternal homeland for which we pine, the Promised Land into which our Jesus will lead us, the new Jerusalem, Jerusalem the Golden.

What else do we learn from this Holy Gospel? It's packed with lessons, no doubt, but there is one other lesson I would like us to draw from it today.

Here's a news story I stumbled upon recently from somewhere out west:

An 11-year-old boy killed a bear at point-blank range last Wednesday night after it wouldn't leave his family's porch. The boy was at his home near Driggs with his younger sisters and after seeing the bear on the front porch and not being able to get it to leave, the boy retrieved a gun and killed the animal.

That 11-year-old might have been a boy, but I tell you shooting a bear makes him at least a little man. If taking down a huge beast threatening your family won't put hair on your chest, I don't know what will. He saw a threat and took care of it. He stood his ground to protect his loved ones.

If killing a bear makes that boy a man, though, what should we make of our Lord Jesus in our Holy Gospel? He doesn't fight back. He doesn't take care of the threat, so to speak. He stands silently as He is slandered. He answers truthfully Pilate's questions, but not in such a way that He seems to be trying to get back at His enemies, or even really plead His innocence all that much. What is wrong with Him? Don't we have to wonder that at least a little? I mean, what would any of us do in the same situation. I think we'd be full of protestations, and perhaps even some kicks and screams.

The question is not what was wrong with Jesus, but rather what was right with Him. He certainly does stand before Pilate fighting back, though it might not look it at first glance, and fighting back mightily, even as He seems passive and indifferent. He must be condemned to protect His loved ones. He must be knocked down and lifted up to stand His ground. Through His submission to the cruel judgment of the world He is making possible the merciful verdict declared upon the believer, upon us, through faith. He is convicted to pardon us. He is wounded to heal.

The Corinthian congregation had an unfortunate obsession with power, or at least with rank and status. They wanted to be the premier congregation, the premier pastor, or premier member. To them, St. Paul, the chief of sinners, so often persecuted for his faith, honest in his humble assessment of his preaching abilities, wrote, "*[Christ] is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.*"

As Christians we are often never stronger than when we are weak, when Christ alone is our stay and strong tower, when as Simon of Cyrene helped Him carry His cross, He takes up His position at our side and bears up with us under our crosses. And in our Holy Gospel we see precisely the extent of His strength under weakness. When anyone else would have folded, when anyone else would have left us to our own dark fate in hell, Christ stood His ground, received an unjust verdict, and prepared for the torments of Holy Week, all to save His loved ones, the very ones who sought His death, members of the very human race that had ruined His Father's creation and are nor born in enmity toward Him.

Learn of that sacrificial love, and treasure the fruit of that sacrifice, forgiveness, life, and salvation. And should the Lord call you to be weak at times that His strength might be displayed in you and through you, don't hesitate to take your stand with your Jesus, to bear up your cross as salt and light in a fallen world, as jars of clay in the Potter's hand.

We are Americans. We are Christians. Faithfully live as both and seek the best from and for both kingdoms, and in all you do, whether in the church or the state, do it with the humility and selflessness of your King who gladly sacrificed Himself for the salvation of His subjects. Amen.