

## John 18:33-37 Otherworld

A number of things converge as we come to this last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next week begins the new calendar with the first Sunday in Advent, and one can't help but look forward to Christmas. Thursday past was Thanksgiving, a time that compels each to take stock of things in the direction of gratitude, looking for the blessings of life.

It took me by surprise a few years back when I began paying closer attention to the Christian calendar that the last few Sundays before Advent are not actually focused on Thanksgiving, which is a national holiday, very much inspired by our faith, but not generated by it like Christmas and Easter. The liturgical focus is on the end times, eschatology, as we call it; the return of Christ. So we add *that* to our list of things on our mind.

In the gospel reading for this day we find the encounter between Jesus and Pilate, which seems to fit better in a Lenten or Passion time of the year, but one can make the connection.

Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world . . . but from another place." The lectionary calendar requires us to think of that other place now, on the last Sunday of November right as we are on the verge of being asked to think of the birth of Christ which connects the other place to this place; the place of birth and death, the muddy reality of humanity, the

"thin veneer of civilization" as someone has called it, that separates us from the rest of animal life.

## The Spiritual Realm - Eternity

Some in our time don't believe in that other world. They look around at the natural order; sometimes I will call it the material world, or the empirical world, that which can be seen, so it can be observed, the domain of science, and say that whatever one may call it, is *all there is*.

Most, however, accept the idea of the eternal, or the spiritual, and that is the realm of religion. Religion is also the realm of relationships, which don't submit themselves to scientific principles very easily. It is in relationships that we are familiar with the non-material realities that are such an important part of life:

Love, friendship, honor, integrity, dignity, humility, honesty, generosity, compassion, goodness; it made me think of the fruit of the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; things like that that have no chemical formula, molecular structure, physical properties, but without which one cannot live.

And, of course, there is the dark side; hatred, malice, greed, selfishness, dishonor, duplicity, deceit, enmity, arrogance, and pride; it made me think of the acts of the sinful nature, as Paul puts it, things like sexual

immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, stuff like that. All of these are realities we only know in our interactions with people, the ones we know and love, the strangers we consider enemies, and everyone in-between.

And yet even those who think the natural world is all there is have relationships; they have friendships and family, and sometimes enemies, people they can't live without for reasons that defy explanation.

## Gratitude

In the spirit of the season let me add one more, gratitude. The bible never fails to mention it as one of the staples of the spiritual life. I have learned over the years of its importance, and of the danger of its opposite, which I could call ingratitude but I am going to call it self-pity, which is one of its other names.

Gratitude is the product of an outward focus, self-pity is the product of an inward focus. Gratitude proceeds from an awareness of grace, that one has been accepted. Self-pity is a lie of rejection. Gratitude is positive, it is aware of hardships, and challenges and pain and death, but is not overwhelmed by them. Self-pity deceives one out of being able to see anything good, Gratitude is a liberation, self-pity is an incarceration. We are called to Thanksgiving - as we

are reminded by the psalmists refrain, "Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, God's love endures forever."

## Pilate

In view of all this, there is a comical quality to the John's version of the interrogation of Jesus by Pilate. The prefect is steeped in the things of this world. His situation is that of a provincial governor trying to keep the peace for a foreign empire in a place that is particularly hostile to it. He can only see Jesus as a political figure, someone out to undo the power of the empire Pilate represents.

So when he asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews, he means something very definite. It is a yes or no question that Jesus answers it in a rather theological way. The two are talking at cross purposes to one another.

The answer Jesus gives makes it clear that one cannot adequately understand this life unless one also has some basic idea about the other world, over which he is the true king.

So as we tip the hat to the modern fall celebration we call Thanksgiving, let us think for a few moments on this last Sunday before Advent, about that other world. Jesus makes one statement about it in this text that we can speak about directly. He says he came to "bear witness to the Truth." Admittedly, the bible allows us to

use other words to speak about it, but truth is a good place to start.

## The Other World

As is becoming more clear to us as history unfolds, truth about things is not so easy to ascertain. Some people say we live in a post-truth world. Pilate, in the very next verse asks, “What is truth?” We are still asking after it. But let us distinguish between truth about various things and what Buechner calls, “truth itself.” Jesus did not come to bear witness to truth about various things.

He made no comment about many interesting questions affecting his own time, let alone ours. He did bear witness to some universal truths that we must acknowledge and for which we can give thanks.

He preached the Kingdom of God and described God as just and good, compassionate and kind. He proclaimed an end that would make right all the apparent wrongs. He insisted upon the intrinsic value of every human being, and presented God as a God of healing and wholeness even though the people were sinful, undeserving of grace.

He established a value system that places relationships over money and things and warned against the attachments to this life based upon selfish

desire and pleasure, advocating instead sacrificial service as the way to meaning and health.

He told stories in which he challenged us to see that life is more than what it seems, beauty is found in unsuspecting places, and he proclaimed the ultimate victory of goodness over evil, order over chaos, and life over death.

And in the very moment that he went on trial and was rejected by the authorities of this world, he established the victory of the world from which he said his kingdom came.

It is easy to despair if the kind of high and noble ideals that Jesus proclaims as his kingdom. And the world of his time rejected him, as it largely does now.

But we are called nonetheless to think towards these things on this, the last Sunday before Advent; to hope for them, and to believe in them, not deluding ourselves into thinking we are going to bring in the kingdom by either our evangelistic efforts or our efforts at societal change; but also not ignoring the responsibility to do what we can to make ourselves and our world better; to live towards the other world from which we came, to which we go, and over which Jesus is king.

Let us give thanks, no matter our circumstances, and rejoice in our salvation, now and forever, amen.

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