

John 18:18-37

Whose Kingdom?

One of the things that I have appreciated about being able to study scriptures in order to preach is that I regularly have to question my assumptions, my Sunday School upbringing, and what I have come to understand as I have matured in my faith. I give thanks because it means that I am still learning, that I have not become stuck in one way of thinking, unwilling to change. One of the ways we learn about scripture is through hymn singing. Like any music, the words get stuck in one's head and through repeated listening, and singing, whether off key or not, we absorb the meaning, or what we think is the meaning.

When Ken and I were driving to Alberta this past summer listening to some music that we grew up on, *Blinded by the Light* started playing and we laughed as we still don't know what the words are, let alone what they mean, but we sang that line "Blinded by the light" faithfully every time it was repeated in the song. With Siri, it was easy to look up the lyrics, and now I know why I have never known the words, they are rather nonsensical and random in my mind.

Speaking of music, there is an old 19th century hymn that I rarely choose to sing or have sung in worship. and it is because I have always understood it to be militaristic. *Onward Christian Soldiers* has caused me great consternation as I envision Christians "marching as to war," as it says in the chorus, and making nations Christian at all cost, "with the cross of Jesus going on before!" And that has never jived with my understanding of God's love for all people, people created in God's own image, regardless of colour, culture, gender, or any other filter we want to place on people.

Imagine my surprise when I learned it was written for Sunday school children gathering from one village with another. It does have many overtones of the superiority that was prevalent regarding British triumphalism, but that it was written for children never crossed my mind. I'm still not crazy about the hymn though I can, upon study, have some appreciation for what was being expressed, especially when one uses another approach to the words of the hymn based in Jesus' words in John 18 saying, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Again, this passage has been interpreted for a long period of time as saying, Jesus' kingdom is not of the world, because if it were, people would have fought for Jesus, so Jesus must be talking more ethereal than physical. Even Jesus' followers did not understand what was happening. They were afraid, and just wouldn't stand up for him,

but this approach assumes that Jesus followers would need to take the Romans and Jewish authorities on by force. Heck the followers of Jesus themselves thought this was the only way to bring about the kingdom of God, something they understood and assumed from the Hebrew scriptures. More than once they sought to have Jesus take up his power and lead them into a battle that would consummate in victory for Jesus' followers.

But here is Jesus, standing in front of Pilate because he has been handed over by the Jewish authorities to be punished, and yes done away with in the way that all knew was the end for those who sought to threaten the powers that be in the Roman Empire. Which is why Pilate asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He was not looking for some religious answer or understanding of Jesus' teaching, he was inquiring because he wanted to know if Jesus was a threat to Pilate's power and authority.

Now Jesus' answer seems a little cryptic, something like the lyrics for *Blinded by the Light*. Jesus, as I mentioned before answers with, "My kingdom is not from this world...my kingdom is not from here. I think that many of us have been inclined to understand that meant Jesus' kingdom was in heaven, some far off place that we might all get to see after we die. But what if Jesus' kingdom, God's kingdom, was right here, right now, and the reason Jesus' kingdom was not from this world is because the kingdom of God is all about love, and to have people fight one another for dominance and power through intimidation, strength, and violence alone would have meant being like any other power the world had seen and experienced before and since.

Now I get the we are not Jesus and in this world at times we seem to have to find justice and peace through wartime experience. Our commemoration of Remembrance Day attests to that fact, but what if generally we all aimed for a response of loving kindness, forgiveness, and grace when we approach anything from how we feel about ourselves, to how we treat our co-workers or the people who live in the room beside us, and then extended it into the corridors of power on Parliament Hill. Good chance attack adds, and smear campaigns would be out the window. We would not have the polarization of positions in conversations and actions. There would always be concern for the well-being of others rather than decisions about what is best for me and my family without regard for the vulnerable, and this conversation extends from health care to access to opportunities and income, as well as governance and power.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. We don't tend to like the terms reign, kingdom, domain, King or Lord. These words come across as archaic and reek with overtones of dominance over others in ways that we don't want to participate. Yet, is there a way to understand and use of these words in ways that are helpful? If they become defined by how we treat others in light of Jesus' love and sacrifice, God's grace and hope, does that take the sting off?

We do like these words when we use them to describe our own self-sufficiency. We want to be lord of our lives. Our homes whether a small room or acres of land we want

to reign over. These are our little kingdoms. We also claim domain names on the internet. So maybe the words are not as archaic as we believe, we just need to adjust what they represent. Rather than a kingdom that lords over others with power and dominance, we think of the kingdom of God as a place where love does conquer all, where a peaceable kingdom is achievable, our domains, whether virtual or physical, are places where all are welcome, hospitality provided, and grace abounds.

This is the kingdom that Jesus was talking about when he answered Pilate and the reason Jesus' kingdom is not from this world. And yet, even after more than 2000 years we still don't get it. We still don't understand what kind of kingdom Jesus was talking about. We still want to dominate, be on top, be in control and we will use whatever means we need in order to achieve our own little kingdoms. Nations will still do whatever it takes to dominate over nation, and leaders work to dominate over those who follow whether in business, politics, or relationships.

And maybe that is the crux. Jesus' kingdom, God's kingdom, is about relationships of love, compassion, hope, grace, and forgiveness. This is not about dominance but rather about how to be in relationship with others in ways that honour and value the other, right from our familial relationships through to global relationships.

I get it, we are not there, not by a long shot. We still think in terms of lording it over one another rather than loving one another, and until we figure it out there will be wars, strife, and harm. Still, I don't think we need to give up so easily or resign ourselves to this fate. Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. Jesus demonstrated what a kingdom of love could look like and when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" we do it with expectation and desire that Jesus' reign of hope, peace, joy, and love will find a place in our own lives and then from us out into the world.

So today, I still don't want to sing *Onward, Christian soldiers*, but rather let's sing, "We've a story to tell to the nations that shall turn their hearts to the right, a story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light, for the darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noon-day bright, and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth, the kingdom of love and light." Amen.