

The Inclusive Community

Nov. 22, 2009

Theme: Reign of Christ and of Love

John 18:33-37

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In today's gospel we witness the scene of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. We hear the reluctant Pilate question Jesus. I can't help thinking that Jesus would have done well on Meet the Press—as he answered Pilate's questions with clever replies. He seems to be indicating that not only does Pilate "not get it" but that perhaps he's incapable of "getting it" because of his perception of what "kingdom" was. How awful it must have been for Jesus to stand before Pilate, who had the temporal power to order him executed, but did not have within him any understanding of the kind of "kingdom" Jesus was revealing. Aligned with Pilate were the chief priests and their allies who were also intimidated by Jesus and his message.

To better understand why Jesus was both misunderstood and feared, we need to take a cursory look at the domination system of the time. Rome ruled the Jewish homeland from the elite class—so Galilee was ruled for about 30 years by Herod Antipas, Judea by temple authorities under a high priest appointed by Rome who tried to satisfy both Rome and his Jewish subjects. Therefore, the authorities in Jerusalem had an economic stake in how the Galilean Jews lived and behaved. The system was created and ruled by the powerful and the wealthy in order to serve their own financial interests. They were oppressive to the rest of the population. As a result, the economic consequences for the peasant class were severe. (sound familiar?) The Jewish response ran the gamut from accommodation to social cooperation with Rome while trying to satisfy their Jewish subjects in order to keep them politically quiet.(This also sounds familiar).

There were 2 ways of resistance for those without a voice: that of violent resistance, resulting in desperate outbreaks against Rome, and the path of non-violent resistance which could be passive (including loyalty to the practices of Judaism)—and active (involving crowds who Josephus the historian, tells us gathered in protest in front of Pilate’s residence and who even presented themselves ready for slaughter before Caligula because he was building a statue of himself for veneration. Jesus was a non-violent active resister, who advocated for the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love and empathy—the kingdom of inclusivity emanating from within, a kingdom incomprehensible to the elites and their followers. It is not the kingdom of the future or the one we are working to enter—it is the kingdom of Now, the spirit within us through which we connect to others and to the whole cosmos. It is a kingdom of connections.

But let us return to the last week of Jesus’ life to the scene before Pilate which took place significantly during the week of Passover in Jerusalem—not just any city, but central to the geography of Judaism—the holy city---the home of the temple, the focus of Jewish devotion and the center of the native domination system. When Jesus entered this city on what we call Palm Sunday, that entry signified the choice of two kingdoms---two visions of how to live your life on earth. We know the choice that Jesus lived and taught was the path of love, the path where the people were, the kingdom within and NOW , signified by his entrance into the city on a donkey. On or about the same day, Pilate rode into the city from the opposite side at the head of a cavalry with a reinforcement of foot soldiers. Imagine this imperial scene with weapons, helmets, golden eagles glinting in the sun, and the eyes of the on-lookers—some curious, some awed and some resentful. Jesus’ entry was what we might call a counter-demonstration in today’s parlance. ---the kingdom of Love entering as one who was “of the people”—not high above them, not glittering from without, but connecting from within with a love and compassion for all.

Fred will now tell you a Jewish folktale to emphasize the 2 kingdoms, the 2 choices and how the Reign of Love, of cosmic connectness can be revealed even to a patriarch.

Fred---The following is based on a Jewish folktale. It is a story of not how things were, but how they could have been. Long ago in a very faraway and neglected corner of Russia, almost a day's ride from the Czar's summer palace, there lived a farmer named Frankel. He was happily occupied digging up turnips in what he called his field which was actually the size of a large table cloth. It was a rare sunny day and he was so absorbed in his work he hardly noticed the horseman coming down the road. What he saw made him stand up and drop his spade in amazement. It was the Czar. Frankel bowed deeply. "Do not be surprised, my friend", said the Czar. "Often when I am sick to death of court councils and endless feasts I saddle my horse and go riding about my kingdom, talking to my subjects. I'm very interested to observe that although the hair on your head is grey, the hairs in your beard are still black. It's something I've noticed in people before, but no one seems to know the reason for it."

"O mighty Czar, Frankel replied (reasoning that he couldn't possibly be too polite to a Czar), "I am only a poor Jewish farmer, but the reason is this, the hairs on my head started growing when I was born. Those on my chin only started when I was thirteen years, after the bar mitzvah ceremony when I became a man. Therefore, the hairs on my chin are much younger and are not yet gray."

"Amazing!" said the Czar, "How simple yet how logical. I'm overjoyed to have discovered the answer to a question that has long been puzzling me. Now I beg of you, my friend, tell no one else about what you have told me. Let it remain a secret between us. Do you agree?" "I will only reveal my secret after I have seen your face a hundred times. Sire", said Frankel. So the Czar set off on his horse, chuckling to himself and Frankel resumed digging up his turnips.

When the chief returned to the palace, he asked all his advisors to gather around. "Here," he said, "is a question. Why does the hair on the head grow

grey before the hair of the beard? Whoever can answer that question will be promoted to the position of Chief Advisor to the Czar.

All the advisors scurried about asking everyone they knew but found no satisfactory answer. Finally two of the advisors were discussing the matter when one said, "I remember when the Czar asked that question, he had returned from a ride to the Western territory. Maybe the answer can be found. On a day in which Frankel had finished his garden chores, Frankel was about to enter his home when two horsemen arrived. They asked him if the Czar had recently visited him. "He did." replied Frankel. They then asked him if he told the Czar why the hair on the head turns gray before the hair on the beard.

"Yes," replied Frankel," but I am not at liberty to tell you gentlemen."

The advisors sighed, "Is there anything we could do make you change your mind?"

Frankel thought for a moment, "One hundred silver rubles will change my mind instantly." He was immediately given a bag with the requested rubles.

Frankel sat down in the road and carefully counted them. When he finished, he revealed exactly how he answered the riddle.

The trouble began when the Czar was told the answer.

"How could you possibly know this?" shouted the Czar in anger.

"We met a Jewish farmer on the road," they said, "and he told us".

"And he agreed to say nothing, the scoundrel" The Czar stamped his foot and sent for the Chief of police. "Go to the farm and bring Frankel here at once. Also alert the firing squad. This will be Frankel's last day on earth." Eventually the police brought Frankel to see the Czar.

"What do you have to say for yourself, you wretch", yelled the Czar. "Did you not promise me that you would not reveal the secret you told me?" "I said, whispered Frankel, "that I would only reveal it after I had seen your face a hundred times." "But this is only the second time that you have seen me, you worm! What have you to say before I have you shot?" "Forgive me Czar," said Frankel. He then took out the bag of rubles the two advisors gave him. "Here are one hundred coins. I have looked at every one. Therefore I'm sure you will agree, I have seen your face one hundred times." The Czar was stunned, full of

admiration for Frankel's sharp wits. "I shall get rid of all my advisors and appoint you instead. You shall want for nothing my friend."

As time passed, the Czar grew to trust the farmer and a friendship grew between the two. The Czar gradually began to change. He came to believe that every man and woman had dignity. He spent more time with his family, was more aware of the needs of the poor and listened to his subjects with respect and patience.

In fact, Frankel had such a great effect on the Czar that he commented, "When I first met you I was amazed that someone could be so content with so little." "I envy you, my Czar, who is content with even less than I" responded the farmer. "How can you say that, if this entire country belongs to me?" - said the offended Czar. "I say that for precisely that reason. I have the music of the celestial spheres. I have the moon and the sun, because the God of the universe is within me and is within all people. My Czar, you only have your subjects. But let's talk about what you can do for your subjects and with them. Let's talk about how you can earn their respect not through fear but through respect for each one of them!"

The Czar gradually grew to be a peaceable man enjoying life and family and beloved by his countrymen in the company of his advisor and friend, Frankel the farmer. His attitude might be represented by the original Aramaic word "heaven" in the Our Father: "nethquadash shmash" which means "Focus your light within us, make it useful." We could add, use it Now as we evolve in the Reign of Christ and Love.