

Authority

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on 23 November 1997, Christ the King Sunday. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Can we imagine Jesus speaking with men and women in political authority? What would Jesus say to them? In our Gospel lesson we see Jesus talking face to face with a man holding a high political office, Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judea. Pilate had full authority over the province. He had authority over several thousand soldiers. He had the authority of life and death - he could flog an innocent man like Jesus and send him to his death or he could release a murderer, ^{or} like Barabbas, and set him free. Facing Pilate was Jesus who also had authority, although of a quite different sort. Jesus didn't have authority over armies, nor did his authority derive from the emperor Tiberius, but the Gospel writers tell us that he had the authority to cast out demons, to forgive sins and heal sick people. His word carried so much authority that dead men would respond to his call to new life and rise from the dead and leave their tombs. And Jesus had authority over nature: he changed water to wine, multiplied the loaves and fish, and calmed a violent storm by the authority of his word. The writer of the book of Revelation calls Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords. So Jesus and Pilate both wielded authority. And we overhear these two men of authority talking to one another.

~~Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "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." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"~~

IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON WE HEARD WHAT

~~That's what~~ Jesus said to Pontius Pilate. But what would he say today to people in authority? What would he say to President Clinton or House majority leader Newt Gingrich or Senate leader Trent Lott? I want to suggest what Jesus might say based on what he actually did say to Pilate.

First, I think Jesus would say something about telling the truth. Jesus said to Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs

to the truth listens to my voice." You know the old joke - "How can you tell if a politician is lying? - His lips are moving!" Unfortunately, our political leaders don't have a good reputation for telling the truth. Several years ago, during the Bush administration, James Patterson and Peter Kim asked people across the country to rank 73 occupations for their honesty. Americans rated Senators below talk show hosts like Geraldo. Former President Bush's honesty was ranked in 28th place. Members of Congress were ranked among the seven *least* moral professions in America. Congressional members ranked just above TV evangelists, organized crime bosses, and drug dealers in terms of honesty. People in political authority don't receive very good marks in the area of telling the truth.

Jesus, though, bears witness to the truth. As followers of Jesus, we have the responsibility to bear witness to the truth to all those in authority; "truth speaking to power" as the Quakers say. So I believe that Jesus would say to those in political authority, "Tell us the truth! Be honest! Don't cover up your mistakes! Don't make dishonest promises that you know very well you can't keep! Don't distort what your political opponents say!" When the government doesn't tell the truth, we, as followers of Christ must bear witness to the truth even when it's unpopular.

Several years ago I had dinner with an elder in the McClean Presbyterian Church outside of Washington DC where a number of Congressional leaders attend. The elder told me that one of the Sunday School classes had been studying and ^{discussing} ~~discussion~~ the Ten Commandments. On the Sunday after a national election a Congressman was leading the discussion on the ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." He began by saying, "I'm glad I didn't have to lead this lesson before the elections." Everybody laughed! Everybody understood what he meant. Increasingly, elections have been marred with false accusations made by people on both sides of the aisle, lies told in order to win an election. So, first of all, I believe that if Jesus were to address those in political authority he would talk about telling the truth.

Secondly, I believe that Jesus would warn people in authority to beware of special interest groups. It's altogether proper in a democracy to seek to influence our leaders, but the

Gospels describe an ugly incident that demonstrates what can happen when political leaders cave in to special interest groups. Pilate listened to religious lobbyists who demanded the death of Jesus. This special interest group was very powerful. Pilate was eager for their support so he let them influence him to do what he knew was wrong. So, Jesus might well say to President Clinton and to Congress, "Don't do what you know is wrong to appease special interest groups."

Third, I think Jesus would tell the President and Congress that he doesn't need to defend his kingdom by the use of force. "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." In other words, "If my kingdom were of this world I'd use political and military weapons to defend it. But my kingdom is not of this world. I don't need my disciples to defend my kingdom with weapons or try to impose my kingdom on unbelievers by force."

Let me give two examples. The first has to do with abortion. Many Christians believe that abortion is the taking of human life. Our own church, although clearly pro-choice, is not pro-abortion. The official teaching of the church is that abortion is always morally ambiguous at best ^{but it should be decided by a woman in consultation with her doctor & religious leaders after much prayer.} And abortions should never be sought for the sake of convenience, to avoid embarrassment, for gender selection, or as a means of birth control. ^{our church believes} But we should not seek laws to impose our beliefs on others. ^{we should use the authority of our word rather than the authority of government to persuade people} Several years ago, Paul Hill, a militant pro-life activist, did the very thing that Jesus refused to do. ^{He used weapons to impose his beliefs on others.} He murdered an abortionist and his security guard in Pensacola, Florida. He proved that it's possible to be antiabortion without being pro-life. On the basis of my understanding of Christ's kingdom and authority, I believe Hill's actions were an abomination. Those who belong to the Kingdom of Christ must never use the weapons of worldly kingdoms to protect or extend Christ's Kingdom.

The second example has to do with prayer. Jesus commands his disciples to pray in his name and in his name alone. He's called us to teach our children to pray. He tells us to pray for our political leaders. Unfortunately, there are many signs that point to the church's failure to teach prayer. We've not been very successful in teaching our children to pray. We don't know

how to pray ourselves. Prayer meetings are very poorly attended. Surveys within the Presbyterian church indicate that daily prayer as part of our daily devotions is almost nonexistent. Even grace before meals has been largely ignored.

So what an embarrassment, what an admission of our failure and disobedience when we turn to the government to encourage and teach our children to pray. To paraphrase George Will, an political editorialist, "The government can't even deliver the mail on time, why in the world would we ever trust it to teach our children to do something as important as praying?" Christ doesn't need to defend his Kingdom by using the weapons of this-worldly governments.

Finally, I think Jesus would challenge all those in authority to consider their relationship to him. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" And Jesus responded, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" I believe Jesus would say to all those authority, "I know you've listened to what others say about me but what are your own ideas about me?" And I think that Jesus would be so bold as to say to Christian and non Christian alike, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

So, what would Jesus say to people in authority and to all of us? Tell the truth! Don't be influenced by special interest groups to do what is wrong! Don't defend Christ's Kingdom through the use of force! Consider the claims of Christ and to stand on the side of truth and listen to him!

Eternal God,
you set Jesus Christ to rule over all things,
and made us servants in your kingdom.
By your Spirit empower us to love the unloved,
and to minister to all in need.
Then at the last bring us to your eternal realm
where we may worship and adore you
and be welcomed into your everlasting joy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.
We praise you, great God,
for you are ruler of the universe,
and have sent your Son to be King of kings.
We rejoice that he has triumphed over all the powers of this world,
and governs the nations in justice and righteousness.
We celebrate his victory
in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to honor and might at your side.
By your Spirit,
claim our complete loyalty,
establish Christ's rule in every land and in every heart.
Accept our homage
as we offer our lives in the service of Christ's kingdom.
He is Lord forever and ever. Amen.