

CONTESTED CLAIMS TO AUTHORITY

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In our Gospel lesson we see Jesus talking with a governor. Governor Pilate had summoned Jesus because Jesus was involved in a dispute with the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court had ruled that Jesus was illegitimately claiming authority. A few days before Jesus had entered Jerusalem in what looked like a inaugural parade. His followers took to the streets demonstrating and proclaiming Jesus king. Governor Pilate knew Jesus had popular support but he also knew that a powerful segment of society was bitterly opposed to Jesus. Never in memory had Jerusalem been so divided about contested claims to authority. Pilate wanted to know where Jesus stood in this dispute so he summoned Jesus. As a result we have the privilege of overhearing what Jesus said to a career politician, to a governor. His conversation with Pilate prompts me to ask, "What would Jesus say to a governor today, or to a vice-president?" What would Jesus say to Vice President Gore and Governor Bush?

First, I think Jesus would say something about telling the truth. Jesus said to the governor of Judea, "For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Unfortunately, both the Vice President or the Governor have a reputation for dissembling, of concealing the truth under some pretense. Jesus, though, is a political authority who bears witness to the truth. We, as followers of Christ the King, have the responsibility to bear witness to the truth to our political leaders and to demand of them that they tell the truth.

What if President Richard Nixon or President Bill Clinton had simply told the truth? Think of the agony they would have spared us, let alone the cost of their dishonesty and dissembling. Because they didn't tell the truth, one was forced out of office and the other impeached. I had dinner with an elder from the McClean Presbyterian Church outside Washington, DC where many Washington politicians attend including Vice-president Gore on a few occasions. The elder said his adult Sunday School class had been studying the Ten Commandments. On the Sunday after the election a congressman led the discussion on the ninth commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." He began, "I'm glad I didn't have to lead this lesson before

the election." Everybody laughed! Everybody understood what he meant. Increasingly, elections have been marred by false accusations made by both Democrats and Republicans, lies told in order to win an election. So, first of all, I believe that if Jesus were to meet with Governor Bush and Vice President Gore he'd talk to them about telling the truth.

Secondly, I believe that Jesus would warn Vice President Gore and Governor Bush 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 a powerful religious lobby out to crucify Jesus. Pilate wanted their support so he let them influence him to do what he knew was wrong. So, Jesus might well say to Governor Bush or Vice President Gore, "Don't do what you know is wrong to appease special interest groups - no matter how much money they give."

Third, I think Jesus would tell Governor Bush and Vice President Gore that they don'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."

Sometimes Christians want the government to force citizens to do God's will. Here's one example. There's been a lot of discussion over the last several years about prayer in schools. Some people say that our schools have gone down-hill ever since the Supreme Court ruled mandatory school prayer as unconstitutional. In reaction to this, some Christians lobby for a school prayer amendment that will give school boards the authority to impose prayer on school children.

Now prayer is extremely important for Christians. But I don't think Jesus would be very pleased with a government mandated non-sectarian prayer. Jesus commands us to pray in his name alone. And Jesus explicitly teaches that parents and the church have the primary responsibility in teaching our children to pray,

not the government. Unfortunately, many signs point to the failure of church and parents to teach our children to pray. We adults often don't know how to pray and are mortified when asked to pray in public. Surveys within the Presbyterian church indicate that daily prayer is almost nonexistent. Even grace before meals is absent from many homes.

So what an embarrassment, what an admission of our failure and of our disobedience when we turn to the government, to the kingdoms of this world, to teach children to pray. To paraphrase George Will, a conservative 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?" Now I believe that unfairly criticizes the United States mail service, but it reminds us that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Christ doesn't need to defend his Kingdom by using the weapons of this worldly governments. We don't need constitutional amendments to pray in school or in the home or at work. The church and parents need to take seriously our responsibility to teach our children to pray and to pray with and for them. Besides that, millions of people pray every day whenever they want and wherever they are because prayer is something that can neither be encouraged or forbidden by the government.

Finally, if Jesus were to be summoned by Governor Bush or Vice President Gore I think he'd challenge both of them to reexamine their relationship to him. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responded, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me." In other words, "Pilate, do you really want to know, or are you just a dilettante, one of those politicians who has a superficial interest in who I am and what my authority is?" Jesus would challenge both Bush and Gore to reexamine their core values and their relationship to him. Jesus challenges us to do the same - what authority does Jesus have in our lives. In the hierarchy of competing authorities - self, family, community, state, nation - what authority does the Lord Jesus Christ have in our lives.

So what would Jesus say to people in authority and to all of us? "First, tell the truth. Second, don't be influenced by special interest groups to do what is wrong! Third, don't defend my kingdom through the use of force! Fourth, reexamine your relationship to me!"

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.