

Christ the King Sunday  
Year B  
November 22, 2009  
John 18: 33-37

For many people it was a shocking image. For many it was disturbing.  
For *some* it was heartening.

Last week, splashed across newspapers, magazines, and the internet was an image of our President bowing deeply to the Emperor of Japan.

- "How low will the new American president go for the world's royalty?" wrote the LA Times.
- "There is no reason for an American president to bow to anyone," said Dick Cheney.
- "It's ugly. I don't want to see it," said conservative commentator Bill Bennett.

For sure, many in our country were unhappy with Obama's bow. Others, however, saw it as a gesture of respect. Perhaps it wasn't technically perfect, but I felt it - at least - demonstrated some humility.

Now I didn't spend too much time analyzing the bow, but I WAS interested in exploring what this controversy says about what Americans desire of their leaders, especially in light of the Gospel we just heard and our opportunity today to celebrate the leadership demonstrated by Christ our King.

What kind of leader DO we look for, I wondered.

"I think that Americans would elect a ham sandwich for president if it would promise them jobs and a higher income," noted a Republican strategist as coverage of Sarah Palin's book tour and potential run for the presidency in 2012 eclipsed the coverage of the "bow seen round the world."

I guess the strategist doesn't have much confidence in the voting public ...or - I presume - the candidates often running for office.

I can understand why. It would be easy to continue highlighting examples of the state of leadership - or lack thereof - in our governing bodies. I could continue to point out to you this week's headlines describing election scandals, extramarital affairs, endless debates and rhetorical one-upsmanship,

But I won't.

Honestly, I came out of my musings on politics in America rather sad. What is it that we want? What is it that we will demand from our leaders? Do we only want satisfaction of our perceived material needs? Will we allow our leaders to appear strong and powerful at the cost of seeming arrogant and disrespectful?

And if we are not clear on the type of leadership we desire, if we don't demand the best from our leaders, what does that say about how we see the context within which these leaders operate? What does that say about how we view the world in which we live and our satisfaction with the status quo?

Are we okay living in a world where some eat three meals a day, while others have only one? Are we okay living in a world where girls can go to school alongside their brothers in one country while in another they stay home to fetch firewood? Are we okay living in a world where in countries such as Uganda legislation is being developed that encourages the death penalty for gay and lesbian people who break certain laws around sexual activity?

Why, in a world that is so off kilter, do we spend our time and energy discussing Obama's bow to the Japanese emperor? Why do we succumb to these distractions rather than stand up for the truth, to see the truth for what it is and to look this truth square in the face?

What is it that we are afraid to see before us?

Maybe we can't see the truth because of obstacles put up by others. Maybe we wouldn't recognize the truth if it stood before us.

"What is Truth?" we might ask.

As you might imagine, we wouldn't be alone in our question.

It is the same question Pilate asks Jesus, only we didn't hear the question today. It was, quite unfortunately, left on the lectionary cutting room floor. But it follows immediately after the text we just heard.

Jesus answered Pilate, "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?"

The question can be interpreted in several ways. Is Pilate musing on a great philosophical question as he stands in the regional headquarters among the governor's residence, the local military barracks, and the outdoor courtyard? Is he standing amidst the trappings of power and engaging in a thought experiment?

Or is Pilate dismissing Jesus' statement, having made up his decision not even to consider the truth that stands before him.

I believe it is the latter; I see Pilate turning and walking away as he asks the question.

And in doing so, Pilate turns his back on the Kingdom that God is inaugurating in the life of Jesus Christ.

Pilate turns to the world from which he came and away from the world Jesus offers.

For a moment though, Pilate had been standing between two worlds with an invitation to consider and a choice to be made.

Jesus faces Pilate and, in effect, says to him "belong to the truth."

Jesus is standing with Pilate.

They stand in the midst of a great cosmic venn diagram.

One circle consists of the world we know so well: where politics, greed and envy prevail.

The other circle consists of the Kingdom of God where peace, justice and mercy prevail.

Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, the Kingdom of God comes on earth, beginning to eclipse the world of human sin.

In the scene we read about today, Pilate and Jesus stand together in the space where the two worlds overlap.

It is the place in which Jesus enacts his ministry, inspires his followers, and heals the sick. It is also the place in which he is arrested, tried and killed. It is a place of grace and it is a place of sacrifice.

It is the place which housed a manger and a new born baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. It is the holy ground which supported the incarnation of the word made flesh. It is the ground we inhabit today.

It is the sacred and very real space between two very different worlds.

There is a world represented by the quest for power and influence regardless of the costs, by the competitive politics of the day, by the desire to accumulate wealth even at the expense of others.

This world lies behind Pilate.

There is another world, however, that lies before him.

For us, too, there is a world that lies before us. As we sit in our pews celebrating the end of the liturgical year, we look forward to the beginning of Advent.

We have the world behind us. A world where strength is celebrated and humility stifled. Where politicians speak only the words you want them to hear. Where people with problems are kept out of view.

But we also have the Kingdom of God before us. We have truth standing before us.

And like Pilate we have a choice.

Will we recognize the Kingdom of God that is before us and will we become part of that Kingdom on earth? Will we partake in the Kingdom?

Will we stand before corrupt tyrants, will we confront oppressive policies, and will we work for justice, freedom and peace? Will we strive to renew our relationships with God and one another? Can we recognize the gifts of grace and mercy when they are extended to us? Can we see God's love manifest in all those around us?

We cannot bring about the Kingdom of God. That is God's prerogative. But we can partake in the Kingdom and earnestly pray Thy Kingdom Come.

We can stand before truth and make an honest assessment of our world, of our neighbors' lives, of our responsibility for one another. And, we can accept the mercy and grace extended to us by the one who brings to us the knowledge of God.

Amen.