Text: Palm Sunday/Passion Trials

**Introduction**

Palm Sunday, especially when you add the first part of the Passion reading, has a built in question that I think gets intentionally overlooked. Because contrary to the secular understanding of church that I have to chuckle at, the vast majority of preachers steer a wide berth around anything that might be considered political. So wide a berth in fact that I think we’ve lost the solid theology to think about life in this world. And life in this world is inherently political. Not just electoral politics, but office politics, family politics and even church politics. That is really just one word for life together. And negative connotation come from our sinful natures.

**Text**

And the Palm Sunday text, and the Passion trials, put this front and center. The crowds marching Jesus into Jerusalem are crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is…The King of Israel.” They believed they were declaring The Return of the King. This one was the heir of the long absent Thone of the David. The entire scene is meant to proclaim that. When King David himself had grown old and was so weak that other sons were busy conspiring to take the throne - rallying cities and troops, Bathsheba marches in to the King and reminds him of his promise regarding her son Solomon. And this rallies David to one last striking action. He sends Solomon outside the city…and gets him a donkey…and parades him into the city. The action was loud and clear. If you want civil war, follow the brash princes riding around horses rallying troops. If you want peace, follow Solomon, the designated heir of David, who rides the Donkey coming in peace. And this would become part of the longing, the messiah – the King of Righteousness – would come riding the Donkey. So when Jesus rides into Jerusalem he is making an explicit political statement. The crowds were not wrong. Here is the King of Israel. The one who comes in the name of the Lord offering peace.

And this is not lost on the Pharisees and Chief Priests who at the end of Palm Sunday commiserate with each other, “You see, you are gaining nothing! Look, the world has gone after him.” And every thought they have is how to stop him. Caiphas would even boldly state, “it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish.” Which became their entire strategy with Pilate. “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar…saying that he is a King.” They knew that Rome didn’t care about their religious squabbles. Rome only cared if their religious squabbles started poking into the political order. And as with most political orders, the worst thing you can do is get in the way of their revenue stream. Luther’s actions wouldn’t have taken on such meaning, if he hadn’t gotten in the way of The Pope paying for St. Peter’s with indulgence remittances.

**Christology**

So the question that Pilate sets about answering is “Are you the King of the Jews?” And what type of King was Jesus claiming to be. In Luke and the synoptics what we read is that Pilate pretty quickly decides that whatever type of King Jesus might claim to being, it is not a type that Rome cares about. After all his own people bound him, beat him and handed him over. “I find no guilt in this man.” No guilt at least as far as Rome political order. It is in John’s account that we get a bit more. Pilate calls Jesus back to his chambers alone for a conversation. And he presses him, “What have you done?” But Jesus answers Pilate two things. First, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” And second, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

After this is where we get Pilate’s famous quip “what is truth?”

But it is that picture and how it plays out that helps us think about exactly what king of King, and what King of Kingdom, is the Kingdom of Jesus. And how that Kingdom interacts with the Kingdoms of this world.

And it is here that I want to introduce a theological idea that goes by a couple of names. You might have heard something called Two Kingdoms Theology. Or the division of the Kingdom of the Right and the Kingdom of the Left. If you don’t like the Kingdom word, Augustine called it the City of Man and the City of God. And the main distinction is that in the Kingdom of the Right or the City of God, Christ rules directly.

The Chief Priests can say that Jesus is a Blasphemer. Pilate can think he is an inconvenient innocent. Everyone can have their own answers to “who do people say that I am.” But in the Kingdom of the Right, the Word of God, Jesus’ testimony about himself, is the only thing that matters. And Jesus is the man who asks his father to forgive those who didn’t know what they were doing. Jesus is the man who promises the repentance thief that today you will be with me in Paradise. Jesus is the man who takes care of his mother and disciple. Jesus is the man who says that if praises do not come from men, the stones would cry out. Jesus is the man who says “It is finished.”

It is this same Jesus who gives to the church and believers the keys to bind and loose sins. It is this same Jesus who tells us to go make disciples baptizing and teaching. That the Holy Spirit would come to us in that sacrament of the font. And it is Jesus who tells us to do this – this supper – in remembrance of him. That this is his body and blood of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins.

In the Kingdom of the Right, the only question is if we participate. The will of God is certainly done. The violent have attacked it and borne it away for 2000 years, and yet here is the Kingdom. The Word and Sacraments are not mine, or yours, or anybody’s except Christ’s. And He rules them directly in truth. And everyone who is of the truth listens to his voice.

**Moral**

But how does such a Kingdom work in with the Kingdom’s of the Left…of the World?

The first thing to say is that the Kingdom’s of the Left are still ruled by Christ, but ruled indirectly. Rules through the fallen timber of humanity. Ruled sometimes by people like George Washington or St. Louis. But ever these are fallen men. Just as likely they are ruled by Pilate and Caiaphas. People more than willing to kill innocent enemies if they are getting inconvenient. And probably most often, they are ruled by people just trying to do their best without any solid idea of what that is.

There is no easy formula for the overlap of the Kingdoms. Even if we think we are being ruled by Pilates and Caiaphases, even Jesus admits that Pilate has authority over him.

Most of the Bible’s instruction can be summarized as “being wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The call of the Kingdom of the Right is to truth. And truth is often inconvenient to the Kingdoms of the World. But I do want to at least mention something that is on us that just isn’t part of the world the scriptures were written in. Morally it is less complicated being a subject than a citizen. A citizen, one who has political rights, is morally implicated in how those rights are discharged. And who knows, you might even be elected to something one day. And you might be confronted with a call of the Kingdom of the Right to truth when the mob is yelling at you to lie to them and give them what they want.

And that is probably the moral lesson of Jesus riding in to Jerusalem on the donkey. Your time in the Sunny days following the Jesus of Galilee. Those times when following Jesus is easy. Those times when Jesus might hustle you away on a boat, because the crowds want to make him king and you aren’t prepared. All those times are preparation for these times. When you are placed somewhere to confess to the truth. To confess the King – Christ.

**Eschatological**

Today, the King comes riding the donkey. Today, Jesus’s Kingdom is not of this world. It is a Kingdom of Grace. A Kingdom found in Word and Sacrament.

But tomorrow, it becomes the Kingdom of Power and Great Glory. Tomorrow, those who have confessed him before men will find their thrones. And those who denied him will be outside. Tomorrow he comes not on the donkey, but the charger.

Today is the preparation day. Today we have to negotiate Pilates and Sanhedrins. Today we have to discern the truth as best we can with the help of the Spirit.

Tomorrow, the truth is known by all as the saints are revealed. May we so pass thought things temporal, that we do not lose the things eternal.