

SCRIPTURE READING

John 18:33-37

The Realm of Christ

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and 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 replied, '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.'

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE: CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

Divine Sovereign, your reign is not a reign of this world. Your reign is not a reign of power over the powerless, but of service to those who are oppressed. Your reign is not a reign of wealth mined from the living fabric of the flesh of the poor, but of wise stewardship so that all needs will be met equitably. Your realm is not a realm built on the ruins of war, but a realm rising on the firm foundation of shalom.

By your grace, teach us to be worthy citizens of such a commonwealth. Teach us how to live as your people are called to live: in peace, in love, in truth, and in righteousness. Teach us through the living presence of your Spirit with us to be witnesses of such a commonwealth already here among

SERMON

Text: "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."

In this month's issue of the magazine *Foreign Policy* religion scholar Karen Armstrong has an article entitled, "Think Again: God"¹. In this article she makes the case that, far from atheists' and pundits' claims that God is dead, God is very much alive and well and it behooves politicians of every stripe to pay very close attention to religion and its various world expressions. She opens the article by convincingly addressing the popular notion that religion is at the root of much of the world's political conflict and evil. In fact, in an amusing *naming of misnaming*, she skillfully points out that it is the realm of politics, NOT the realm of religion, at whose door the majority of the responsibility lies for the sheer magnitude and content of the world's conflicts. This is particularly important to highlight because increasingly politics invokes the name of religion to justify its means, and then condemns religion as it sees the results. Armstrong notes, "Theologically illiterate politicians have long given religion a bad name. An inadequate understanding of God that reduces 'him' to an idol in our own image who gives our likes and dislikes sacred sanction is the worst form of spiritual tyranny." By the end of the article Armstrong is advocating that the study of religion is for politicians equally as important as the study of economics and constitutional law. Too many disastrous political decisions are being

¹ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/19/god_0 Follow this link for all quotations related to this article.

made out of sheer ignorance of religion, all the while being done in the name of religion. And subsequently too many poorly considered criticisms of religion are spawned out of emotional reaction to political results rather than actual religious tenets.

This struggle between politics and religion does highlight for us in church today an important tension that is worth our while to think about. For we, too, just like the politician, mix religion and politics; we, too, sometimes use religion to justify political stance; and we, too, can feel angry at religion when we see disastrous results worldwide. This is the tension between government and church that Christians must face because, as Jesus reminds us, we cannot have two masters. On this Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, a day that is traditionally known as Reign of Christ, or Christ the King, when the Church proclaims that we have only one real ultimate leader, we have the blessed and sacred opportunity to look at the relationship between religion and government, and to put both into perspective.

Jesus said, "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."

This tension between religion and politics is not one many of us grew up considering. Many of us were raised with the American flag in the sanctuary of the church. The state resided in the house of God. The civil religion of the early and mid 1900's blessed a nominally Christian nation and part of the Church's role was to train children in the values and ideals of national citizenship. In the lifetimes of most of us in this sanctuary there was no tension for us: the flag and the cross stood side by side.

We all know that this began to change in the 1960's with church-led anti-war rallies and with clergy-led marches for civil rights. Seemingly overnight tension rose between the teaching of the Church and the practice of government. Churches were no longer going to rubber stamp secular policies and culture. Churches were going to lead in the way of the gospel. This time saw not only the rising conflict between church and state, but also the exodus of many church members who did not want any separation between the two, and formed churches which would keep them together.

The tension between the world of politics and the world of religion is not just from a generation past. This tension was significant in the weeks following the September 11 attacks in 2001. We Americans were hurting and angry and frightened and determined. And I heard of more than one church where there was serious conflict over whether or not the Stars and Stripes should be returned to church sanctuaries. The injustice of the attacks was great and many Americans wanted the clear statement that the Church was going to stand up and be counted in its loyalty to the nation. It was as if to say the flag alongside the cross was the declaration that the church stands beside the nation as the nation stands on the side of God.

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This tension is difficult to sort out and easy answers would cheapen the internal struggle that must be fought regarding this, both individually and corporately. So I would like to make a few observations that I hope will give us pause for constructive reflection.

The first observation is that our nation is an expression of values; God is the source of values. Our nation was founded on the principle that all people are created equal, a concept taken directly from the biblical teaching that all human beings are created in the image of God. Our nation has been trying to express that principle in the way it writes and upholds its laws and governs the communities. Despite the very real failures and shortcomings, this is the ideal. The nation is the expression of the value; God is the source of the value. It is never a good idea to mix that up. Our religion should therefore inform and shape our politics. Our politics should never, ever, inform or shape our religion.

There is a second observation I would like to make along these same lines, and it is an important one because here is where there is sometimes confusion. The church is not the source of the values, but the proclaimer of the God's Way. And like our nation, the Church has a mixed history regarding how well it practices what it preaches. All too often the Church needs to be reminded to whom it belongs and God raises prophets to do the reminding. Theologian Karl Barth once said that if the Church was still in the business of canonizing scripture, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail* would be in the bible. King wrote this letter to the white clergy of Birmingham, Alabama while he was jailed there for peacefully marching. In this letter King called the churches back to the ministry of Jesus and how he behaved in the world, and away from the segregated practices of the nation; he was calling the church to live its proclaimed Way. King was reminding his colleagues that before they belong to the nation they belong to God and the Church must always be first and foremost an expression of Christ in the world or else it is failing in its mission. Again, our religion should inform and shape our politics. Our politics should never, ever, inform or shape our religion.

"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.'"

Two generations ago the tension and struggle between the sacred and secular in our nation was embodied in the civil rights movement, a movement led by the Church; and now, ironically enough, the nation is far ahead of the Church because Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America. The struggle of religious people proclaiming justice in the public square is not finished, even within its own ranks. The last two generations have also been struggling with equal rights regarding women and yet, worldwide, women do 2/3 of the world's labor, produce half of the world's food, earn 10% of the world's wages and own 1% of the world's land. In our own nation there are eight states where women who are beaten by their husbands are denied healthcare coverage because spousal abuse is a pre-existing condition. And, in our own nation, in the majority of Christian churches women still cannot be ordained as ministers because they are women; apparently they can carry the savior in their wombs but not proclaim him from their lips. The struggle of religious people proclaiming justice for all, even in its own square, is not finished.

This generation's struggle is for gay rights, and again we have divided churches. "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."

As citizens of a nation how do we practice responsible citizenship and also understand the Church's invitation to recognize Christ as "ruler of all nations" and he to whom "every knee in heaven and on earth shall bow"? Author Dan Clendenin, writing at the turn of the new millennium, answers that question this way.

In its simplest terms, the kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like on earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. Imagine if God ruled the nations, and not Blair, Bush, Putin, Kim Jong-il, Hussein, or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Every aspect of personal and communal life would experience a radical reversal. The political, economic, and social subversions would be almost endless—peace-making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than hubris, embrace rather than exclusion, etc. The ancient Hebrews had a marvelous word for this, *shalom*, or human well-being."²

And *shalom* is what we are working toward: NOT a human-led theocracy, which is simply another form of despotism, but rather a community led way of life that practices *shalom* in all that it does.

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Biblically speaking, in scripture passage after scripture passage, Christians are called to be in this world but not of it, to be *resident aliens*: responsible citizens of nations, belonging to the truth that is in God, testifying to the love that is in Christ, walking in the Way that is led by the Spirit. It is Christ's reign we work toward; this has been the work of the Church for two millennia and will be the work of the Church until it is done. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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² <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20061120JJ.shtml>