

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

John 18:33-37

(Christ the King – Year B)

22 November 2009

Our gospel lesson recalls Jesus' trial before Pilate, a story most of us know very well. Imagine yourself in the room with Jesus and Pilate. It's early in the morning. The dew in the air is just beginning to settle on the ground, while the smell of lamp oil hangs thick in the air. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, is frustrated because he wants the Jewish leaders to deal with Jesus on their own, but they keep pushing Jesus back into his court. Now Pilate is face to face with Jesus. Jesus is bound like a criminal. He is dirty and his cheek is beginning to bruise from the slap of the high priest's guard. Although Pilate's question seems oddly misplaced, addressed to a skinny, dirty, beaten man, Pilate asks Jesus, "So you are a king?"

As we listen in on their conversation, I think I know where our sympathies lie. We know Jesus – as a teacher, as a healer, and as a prophet. We know Jesus – his strengths, his insights, and his miracles. Yet as Pilate poses his question, we all lean in just a little, waiting for Jesus' answer. Even though our interest in Jesus' answer may differ from Pilate's we, too, want to know: "So, are you a king?"

Now Pilate has his own reasons for asking this question. Mostly, Pilate is being pragmatic. As a Roman governor, Pilate wants to make sure that Jesus is simply an early morning annoyance, and not someone significant enough to challenge the Roman authority. After Pilate's very pointed question – "So you *are* a king?" – Jesus answers, "You say that I am a king." All of the gospels agree that this answer is the answer Jesus gives for his charge ...and this answer is likely as frustrating to Pilate as the question is to us. Jesus could have saved himself a lot of trouble had he simply answered, "No." But "no" is not actually his answer. When Jesus is asked if he is a king, he says, "Yes and no." When Jesus is asked if he is a king, he says, "It all depends on what you mean by the word *king*."

The language of Pilate's question poses two big problems for us. First, the word "king" alone hearkens back to stuffy, ancient, pre-Modern sensibilities. The idea of a monarchy doesn't hold much validity today, and is, in fact, something that we Americans have been conditioned to distrust. The other problem with the question is the lack of evidence: what about this world seems to indicate that this world is run by someone who is all-powerful or all-loving. What about this world indicates that this world is run by anyone at all?

About a month ago, Mike Cahill, a 62-year-old physician's assistant, had a heart attack. The good news was that Mike was strong and his recovery was quick. In only a week's time, Mike was out of the hospital and recovering well at home. He and his wife of 33 years, Joleen, had three grown children and, after recovering so quickly from his surprise heart attack, they decided they would still host Thanksgiving dinner at their home like they did every year. The Cahills had wonderful Thanksgiving traditions. In addition to special family dishes made only on Thanksgiving, the Cahills ended every Thanksgiving meal with a family board game around the kitchen table.<sup>1</sup>

In early November, less than two weeks after his heart attack, Mike returned to work. He loved the work he did and took great pride in being able to help people. "He loved his patients, and his patients loved him." Only a few days after returning to work, and exactly three weeks before Thanksgiving, Mike Cahill was busy helping soldiers in his Fort Hood clinic when he was murdered by a single gunman. Mike was a random victim of terrible violence, murdered without reason, along with 12 others. All of them gone in a moment.<sup>2</sup>

Mike Cahill and the other victims of the Fort Hood murders did not earn such a terrible fate. The Fort Hood victims, like anyone who suffers undeservedly, does not earn their pain. In fact, does anyone ever earn their pain? How many of us believe that people can deserve to hurt or suffer? How many of us believe we deserve our hurt or pain? Have we done things that we regret, things that we keep secret, things that we believe validates painful events in our lives? How many of us think that we deserve to be punished for our wrongs?

Whenever we hear the story of Jesus' trial, our own relationship with Jesus is put in stark perspective. Pilate asks the questions that we may not dare ask, but questions that we, at some point, want answered. Pilate stands in for each of us, asking Jesus why, if people think he is so great, does he not simply prove it? If Jesus is a king, shouldn't he be able to save himself? If Jesus is a king, shouldn't he be able to keep evil from running rampant? If Jesus is a king, if Jesus is our king, why can't he keep us from making mistakes, from doing bad things, from hurting others? Pilate's question continues to echo louder and louder, "Jesus, are you a king?"

Jesus does give Pilate an answer. Jesus answers Pilate and us, when he says, "Am I a king? Well, yes and no. But *my kingdom is not of this world.*" Jesus is not king over the world that Pilate governs. Jesus is not king over the kind of world that we have created through our political systems of bickering,

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<sup>1</sup> Staff, *The Wall Street Journal*, "Fort Hood Profiles: Michael Grant Cahill" (November 6, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Surdin, *The Washington Post*, "The Fallen at Fort Hood: Michael G. Cahill had been a physician's assistant for 22 years" (November 6, 2009).

backstabbing, and blackmailing. Jesus is not king over the kind of world that we have created through our financial systems where the rich get richer while the number of people who starve around the world every day continues to grow. No, Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

In Jesus' kingdom, the poor in spirit receive the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus' kingdom, the mournful are comforted, the meek inherit the earth, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled.

In Jesus' kingdom those who win are actually the losers of this world. "Poor in spirit" is not a compliment. Being poor in spirit is not a good thing. Being poor in spirit is not a condition to which we should strive to attain. When Jesus says that the poor in spirit will receive the kingdom of heaven, he is making a claim that is so upside-down, so shocking, and so backwards... *just like his kingship*. Blessed are the poor in spirit for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. The kingdom of heaven comes crashing down to earth where they are. Christ comes to earth where they are – where WE are. Blessed are we for we receive the Christ *because* we are poor in spirit. The kingdom of heaven is for those who don't deserve it, for those who don't earn it.

If at any moment you're thinking, "that can't be right because Jesus must be king of the good people," then Jesus' kingship is not for you, because you are rich in spirit. If you think, "no, Jesus' kingdom is for the hard working," or "no, Jesus' kingdom is for all the people who know they need God," then you have in fact missed Jesus in his own teaching. If we aren't careful we can take Jesus right out of this story. If we aren't careful we can hold on to the political power that Pilate represents and miss Jesus in his own teaching. We can hold on to the wealth and authority that Pilate represents and miss Jesus in his own teaching. Jesus is his own truth.

Jesus' claim to be a king is counterintuitive. We imagine Jesus should be the kind of king we see in our own world, but that's not the king he means to be. He means to save each and every last one of us – the poor in spirit. That is the Good News. That is the Gospel! The Gospel is the *announcement* that in our morally pathetic, messy, confused, ambiguous state, in which there seems to be nothing good within us, Jesus *announces*, "The kingdom of heaven is yours." God sent his son into the world because he so loved the world, and his Son did not come to judge or condemn, he came to save.

For those of you who have been unfaithful to your spouse, the kingdom of heaven is yours. For those of you who have really screwed things up at work, the kingdom of heaven is yours. For those of you who messed up your lives with addiction, the kingdom of heaven is yours. For those of you who can't seem to stay away from websites you know you shouldn't visit, the kingdom of heaven is yours. For those of you who have been rejected by those you love the most, the kingdom of heaven is yours. For all of you

who were convinced that you had done something so wrong that you were away from God's love for good, God's blessings are pouring down on you for the kingdom of heaven is yours. God sent his son into the world because he so loved the world, and his Son did *not* come to judge or condemn, he came to save.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus stood on trial in the midst of the seat of worldly power and righteousness to announce that his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus' kingdom waits for each one of us. Jesus' kingdom is for each one of us who is firmly convinced that the kingdom belongs to someone else. Fortunate are we in our poverty, for we are blessed. Fortunate are we, for Jesus came to save.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the sermon *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, by Rob Bell (September 9, 2009).