

“Not of This World”

St. John 18:33-38

³³ So Pilate again entered the Praetorium and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own account, or did others say it about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But for now my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to him, “So in fact you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

In the Name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most amazing and powerful aspects of the Passion according to St. John, like the whole Gospel according to St. John, is how the dialogue emerges from the events. Like the settings of a jewel showing off its radiance, or like a perfect frame revealing an expertly painted canvas, the earth-shattering events that we have just heard serve to underline and highlight the dialogue of the narrative, between Jesus, Pilate, the chief priests, the crowd, Barabbas, and the beloved disciple himself. And this week the supersaturated words spoken by our Lord have gripped and astounded me.

These words, the give-and-take between these actors on the state of redemption, is endowed with the kind of meaning that beckons us forward to further meeting with this King who, by the end, made Pilate tremble in his own commandant sandals. Every word is worthy of a dozen sermons, but today I audaciously ask us to consider the words of Jesus: **“My kingdom is not of this world.”**

There is no doubt in the final mind of Pilate, or for John who narrates, that the man who stands before the judge is in fact the King. Pilate says as much to the crowd, and erects a polyglot placard to the human race to the same effect, poised over the bruised and wounded head of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Yet Jesus does not so much announce his own kingship (even if it is implied) as announce his own kingdom. And “his kingdom,” he emphatically says twice, “is not of this world.”

What could the King mean when he says that “his kingdom is not of this world”? It cannot mean that his kingdom is not to be found in the midst of this world. In fact, this is very much the fabric of the drama of redemption that we now in hindsight see running through all of Scripture. The King, speaking of his kingdom, says that his kingdom has already “suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). And yet at the same time, he speaks of building his kingdom within this world upon a firm rock (Matthew 16:18-19), “and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” If his kingdom had no presence in this world, there would be no conflict, no struggle, and no triumph. But the King has acceded to his

throne, and begun to reign, and he and his kingdom may be encountered in this world, in a state of both trouble and triumph for the time being.

To be sure, the King cannot mean that his kingdom is not made up of membership from the whole world. We read elsewhere that this same Jesus, the “Lamb that was slain,” is worthy of praise and honor, power and dominion, precisely because by his blood he has redeemed for his God a kingdom “from every tribe and tongue and nation” and he has made them “a people, priests before God who will reign upon the earth” (Revelation 5:9-10). There is no ethnic, no geographic, no political, or any linguistic limit to the kingdom of this King, but indeed his domain encompasses the world in its entirety.

Nor can he mean that his kingdom has no authority in this world. On the contrary, John later declares him not only to be “the Anointed One, the faithful Witness, and the Firstborn from the dead,” but also to be “the Ruler of the kings on earth” (Revelation 1:5). Though he was at that moment a humiliated man standing before the Roman governor, he is in fact “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16), and Pilate would have no authority unless it had been given to him (John 19:11). It is to this King that every knee bows upon earth (Philippians 2:10), whose kingdom will have no end. No, this kingdom has authority in this world to bind and to loose (Matthew 16:19), to remit and to retain (John 20:23), and to declare the lordship of the God-Man by whom and for whom it exists.

So why, beloved in the Lord, is his kingdom “not of this world”? It is because it is built upon his infinite love for the world, not on a finite love found in the world. Every other love in the world is built on love that is always at some level self-serving, partial, conditional love that seeks for and finds satisfaction in what is already lovely and pleasing. This world can only love another because it has already loved itself, and gives love insofar as such love serves itself. Hence every human relationship is to some degree broken and dysfunctional, every kingdom and republic to some degree an empire or a regime.

But that is not Christ’s love, and that is not Christ’s kingdom. His kingdom has been constructed on the foundation of the sacrificial death of its King who in love shed his blood upon the cross, giving his body for the life of the world (John 6:51). This love, brothers and sisters, is the unlooked for hope. This love is the mystery hidden from long ages past (Colossians 1:26). This love is the wisdom of God, foolishness to man, stumbling block to the wise (1 Corinthians 1:23-25), and yet it is the only anchor of the souls who come to him in faith (Hebrews 6:19). Though the wood and nails and ropes of that cross were taken from this world, and the hands of men built and erected it with their King upon it, still what he gave came not through them but through his own free submission to his Father’s will, the Father whom he loves and who loves us with the same measure. In a word, this kingdom is “not of this world” because it comes from a love not of this world, without equal and without bound.

His kingdom is of a love “not of this world” because the King is not of this world. God the Son came to this world that was broken, twisted, and wretched, to give his life for its salvation. He says to Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into this world” (John 18:37). “He, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but instead made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:6-7). There is no other explanation either for the humiliating birth of the Son of God or for his humiliating death on the torturous cross than the otherworldly love that he and his Father shared for this world of sinners from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-6). In the words that we know so well, “So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but everlasting life” (John 3:16).

And this death that he died for you, my beloved, was not of this world either, but sprang forth out of an incomprehensible love for the world. Imagine, if you will, the enormous love of a Father who “did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (Romans 8:32) because “**nothing** can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Nothing. Nil. Nada. As John writes elsewhere, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Is it not incredible, outrageous, blitheringly wild that his love took him to such an end? Brothers and sisters, we are not loveable for what we are. We are sinful, guilty, miserable offenders who deserve death and condemnation for all eternity. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us” (Ephesians 2:4) loves us, not for what we are but as we are, not for what we are but instead for who he is. And on that cross the King of all creation took upon himself our sins, our curse, our condemnation and our death and offered to his Father a perfect sacrifice while simultaneously offering us perfect forgiveness, righteousness, life and blessing. That, my friends, is the love of God made manifest (1 John 4:9). The words of 17th century poet Samuel Crossman put it so well:

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?

What is more, this love of this Father, and of this Son, is a love that indwells us and makes his kingdom’s members “not of this world” as well. The King addresses his disciples and tells them that they are “not of this world” but rather “chosen out of the world” (John 15:19). For this reason the world hates them, just as it hated him, because they are not of this world. They have been born of the love showered

upon them by the blood of the cross, a love that now abides in them as members of this kingdom because he is their King. As he has loved them (when they were in the world), so they are to love each other. His disciples show their love by giving their lives in love not only for their brothers and sisters but also (and especially) for a watching world that hates and despises them.

This is why Jesus tells Pilate that, in fact, his servants would fight were his kingdom of this world (John 18:36). But his servants are not, and his kingdom is not. This King is a Priest who offered the sacrifice of his body for the life of the world, and he has redeemed to God his servants, redeemed you and me, to be a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:5-6; 5:10) who offer to God our bodies and souls as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). Rather than fighting to retain territory, property, liberty, and even life, we his servants, who are not greater than our Master (John 15:20), are to lay down our lives in humble love for the world that hates us, for “our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers.” For the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ his faithful followers “love not their lives unto death” (Revelation 12:11), and in so surrendering themselves they triumph through the blood of his cross. As Isaac Watts puts it in his classic hymn,

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

We live, brothers and sisters, united to him in death, so that we may be united to him in his resurrected life (Romans 6:5), and from now on both life and death are supremely summed up as divine love that has no conditions, no qualifications, no hesitations, and that depends entirely on the free and passionate will of the God-Man who delivered himself up for the life of the otherwise unloveable. This, in answer to Pilate’s question, is truth. This is love. This is *agape*. This is heaven. This is life.

And so I call upon all of us today, in the solemnity of that hour at which the skies darkened and the earth shook and the dead came out of their tombs, to come to this King, to this kingdom, to this love which has no end to height nor depth nor length nor breadth (Ephesians 3:18-19). Come in faith to the Crucified Messiah, to the Lord of all creation, who loved you and gave himself for you (Galatians 2:20). Come to the Living One who was dead and, behold, is alive forevermore, and who has the keys of Death and Hell (Revelation 1:18). Come to the Lamb that was slain, who has ransomed you to God and made you to be a kingdom and priests to God forever. To him be honor and dominion, power and praise, forever and ever. Amen.

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