

Yr. B, Proper 29
November 26, 2006
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1319 words

Lessons:
Psalm 93
Daniel 7:9-14
Revelation 14:1-5
John 18:33-37

“You say that I am a king.” I speak to you in the name of Christ—whose kingdom is not *from* this world, but whose passion was—and still is—very much *for* this world. Amen.

Pilate is in a tight spot. He has to keep order in unruly Judea. He has to keep up appearances with the Jewish power brokers, and (even more importantly) with Caesar. And here stands a revolutionary figure who insists on making things difficult, even to the point of putting words in Pilate’s mouth, “*You say that I am a King.*”

We are also in a tight spot. We try to keep order in our sometimes unruly lives. And we have to keep up appearances with the power brokers in our lives. Here stands the same revolutionary figure. The question before us is this: When it is our turn to take the witness stand, are we prepared offer compelling testimony that Christ is, in fact, guilty of being a king?

Here in America we really don’t understand or appreciate monarchy. Our rejection of monarchy in the American Revolution and subsequently in the writing of the Constitution runs deep through our national DNA. We don’t trust anyone with that much power.

While many of us are fascinated by the British Royal Family, it is a curiosity easily satisfied through the magazines and tabloids at the supermarket. In our minds, kings and queens, princes and princesses are celebrities. They exercise dominion over the ceremonial, and that is about it.

Jesus was also a celebrity, and in today’s Gospel lesson, he exercises dominion over the ceremonial of a Roman trial. Did you notice that Jesus did not answer a single question asked by Pilate? Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answers with his own question, “Do you say this on your own?” Pilate gets more to the point, “What have you done?” Jesus dodges the question by responding, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Pilate follows up, “So you are a king?” And Jesus replies, “You say that I am a king.”

We want to cheer for Jesus and his rhetorical one-upsmanship over Pilate. Yet, we need to realize that cheering Jesus as a celebrity in a show-down with the Roman Governor is not the same as giving testimony with our own lips and in our own lives that would convict Jesus on the charge that he is a king—*our* king—and not simply our favorite religious celebrity.

In order to help us gain a deeper insight into what it *can* mean to be a king—something beyond a celebrity and a ceremonial figure-head—we need not look any further than our own Christian tradition.

Last Monday we celebrated the Feast of St. Edmund. Edmund ascended the throne of East Anglia when he was 15 years old. He was one of several monarchs that ruled various parts of England in the 9th century. Chances are that you will not discover anything about him in the magazines and tabloids at the supermarket.

Edmund had ruled as a Christian king for nearly fifteen years when Danish armies invaded England in 870. They burned monasteries and churches, plundered and destroyed villages, and killed hundreds.

Like Pilate, Edmund found himself in a tight spot. He was trying to keep order in a terribly unruly situation, and keep up appearances in the midst of chaos and bloodshed. The Danes decided to make it easy on him. They offered the young king a cut of the loot they had stolen from his people. All he had to do was acknowledge their supremacy, forbid Christian worship, and be a figure-head ruler—a *celebrity* monarch.

Regrettably, the bishops in his kingdom urged him to accept the terms and avoid further bloodshed. However, the king refused. He declared that he would not forsake Christ by surrendering to pagan rule, nor would he betray his people by consorting with the enemy. In a sense, Edmund took the witness stand and offered compelling testimony with his lips and in his life that Christ was *his* king. Predictably, he was tortured, beaten, shot through with arrows, and finally beheaded.¹

Young Edmund may have been idealistic, but he was most certainly loyal to Christ and to his people. He became a martyr, and the word “martyr” is derived from the Greek word (*marturew*) for witness. There is no more emphatic way to say something than with one’s very life.

Alfred became King of the West Saxons about the time of Edmund’s torture. He also lived in a period of “battle, murder and sudden death.”

Like Pilate, he found himself in a tight spot. King Alfred turned back the Danes, halting the invasion of this vile enemy. And then he did precisely what a Christian leader should do under the circumstances—he loved his enemy enough to persuade them to accept baptism. So not only did Alfred the Great save *England*, he also saved the enemy.²

The easy decision would have been to torture and kill all those who had invaded, and continue the cycle of bloodshed at least until their evil was fully avenged. In a sense, Alfred the Great took the witness stand and offered compelling testimony with his lips and in his life that Christ was *his* king.

When we get in a tight spot, it is easiest to follow Pilate’s lead and simply duck the life-or-death decision about Christ and about one another, and try to straddle somewhere safely between unswerving fidelity to Christ and outright rejection of Christ.

Yet, what we discover—like Pilate—is that there is not much of a fence to sit on when it comes to Christ. And this is the essence of the Good News. You see, there is not much of a fence to sit on because the Kingdom of God is not a Kingdom bound up by fences. Remember what Jesus told Pilate—his kingdom is not from this world! Why, then, should we expect it to look like earthly kingdoms that fence people out or even fence people in?

When we find ourselves in a tight spot, we need to remember that we are not called to be governors—like Pilate—trying to keep order and keep up appearances. We are called—along with Edmund and Alfred—to be kings and queens *with* Christ. The problem with Pilate is not that he didn’t take Christ seriously—he didn’t take *himself* seriously. He didn’t take his own soul seriously.

Friends, in baptism *we* are anointed—“Christ-ened”—to be kings and queens with our Lord, not merely subjects *of* our Lord.

¹ *The Proper for the Lesser Feasts and Fasts-2000*, (NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 440.

² *The Proper for the Lesser Feasts and Fasts-2000*, (NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 410.

Christ has no need for cheerleaders praising his religious celebrity. What Christ *wants* is to have thankful members of his body, sharing his passion for the world with our lips and in our lives. Christ wants us to take our royalty seriously—like blessed Edmund and Alfred—and give compelling testimony that would convict Christ as a king, as *our* king.

Jesus took the worst that the kingdoms of this world could dish out and he set things aright—even though it required sacrificing his very own life. He set into motion a cosmic transformation in which we are given the privilege to participate.

If we take Christ seriously and if we take ourselves seriously, there is but one response—thanksgiving! A thanksgiving that leads us to our knees in prayer. A thanksgiving that leads us forward to hold out our hands at his banquet table. A thanksgiving that leads us to take the chalice and receive his life-giving blood.

Our king is faithful. Our king is merciful. Our king has a passion for this world. Our king hosts a banquet at which all are welcome. And when you show up at his table and then when you show forth his praise in the world, *you* say that he is a king.

Amen.