

November 22, 2015
Last Sunday after Pentecost – The Reign of Christ (Yr. B)
John 18:33-37
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Bob Dylan wrote these lyrics in 1979:

"You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

You may be a state trooper, you might be a young Turk; You may be the head of some big TV network
You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame
You may be living in another country under another name,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are; You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody." [*"Gotta Serve Somebody"*]

Bob Dylan was right – we all “Gotta Serve Somebody”. Today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar year. It is sometimes called the Sunday of Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ. It invites us to consider in what and in whom we place our deepest loyalty, our allegiance. It's an invitation to think about to whom we offer our worship, and our resources. Whom do we serve? Jesus, this One to whom we pledge our loyalty has walked a difficult way, the way of suffering, the way of the cross. On this kingdom road, Jesus will not pick up the tools of violence to establish God's kingdom. Jesus will recruit no followers by means of violence. We have pledged to follow an altogether different kind of king in Jesus. And the way is hard.

“My kingdom is not from this world,” says Jesus. “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.” Long before the time of Jesus, humanity has been firmly caught smack in the middle between two kingdoms clashing mightily - God's kingdom and the kingdom of this world.

The kingdom of this world is about control, about grasping for power to use over others, taking and defending what one has and believes, and if possible expanding the power base to seize even more. This kingdom is very real. It is alluring in its confident strength. And it is so terribly seductive in convincing us that violence is the preferred tool of choice which can solve our conflicts. The kingdom of this world tries to make us believe that violence can stop violence. This kingdom is truly powerful – though only

temporarily powerful. This kingdom is doomed to one day come to its end in opposing the life-giving ways of God.

The other kingdom, God's kingdom, the one Jesus spoke of, the one Jesus embodied, is about living with open hands. Trusting, forgiving - rather than retaliating or lashing out in fear. Reaching out to build bridges to others, to ease pain, to comfort and listen. To unashamedly speak truth to power. To heal and reconcile. To love in a self-giving way, like a servant. To be part of God's kingdom requires a commitment to a particular way of viewing the world. It is an upside down, inside out view compared to the kingdom of this world. God's kingdom is about the Power of Love rather than the Love of Power. It is a kingdom wholeheartedly focused on the saving and transforming of this world.

I think it's fair to say that if we are paying attention to the world around us, we will at some point feel our hearts burdened. We may feel overwhelmed, and our spirits grow heavy with the sin-sickness of the world. We can become weary of living between the clashing of these two kingdoms and the tragedies that seem to never end. Mali. Paris. Beirut. Syria. Charleston, South Carolina. Hatred that seems unstoppable. Between snapshots of fleeing refugees and the death and destruction inflicted by suicide bombings, amid reports of continuing terrorist threats and the potential for fearful and defensive retaliatory responses, we need to be reminded of and challenged by the distinction of this kingdom whose way of life Jesus models.

In his book, Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?, Martin Luther King, Jr. another champion of Christian non-violence wrote:

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Today's gospel passage is usually read on Good Friday. We refer to it as Jesus' trial before Pilate, but it's really Pilate who is on trial. Pilate is caught on the hotseat of how he will choose to use his power. Though he interrogates Jesus and declares him not guilty, Pilate caves in to the people, turns Jesus over to be crucified, and saves himself politically in the process. It's fitting that we hear this passage again on this Christ the King Sunday, because when we look around, we seem to inhabit a Good Friday world. But in Jesus' life and death, we have glimpsed things from the other side and we know that Sunday's coming! Jesus' Resurrection has begun God's re-creating work of making all things new. The end of death and evil and all that seeks to destroy what God has made is certain, and it will happen in God's good time.

So how are we to live in the midst of these days of two kingdoms still clashing, recognizing all the while that God's kingdom is coming? How do we live in the kingdom that is here, but not yet fully here? We do several important things. We come to Jesus to be fed, as often as we can, to receive his life into ourselves. We daily soak in God's love. We allow ourselves to be nurtured and sustained and taught through Scripture reading, prayer, and the companionship and wisdom of other Christians. We pray to stay grounded in hope, steadfast in faith, focused on living out God's love for all people, not just those who look and dress and speak and act and believe like us. We offer up prayers for the world – for peace, for the human family, for social justice, for our enemies, for our country. If you're not sure how to pray for those things, there are powerful prayers found in our Book of Common Prayer that speak to each of these concerns.

And one thing more we do: we give daily “witness to the One who demonstrated power through weakness, who manifested strength through vulnerability, who established justice through mercy, and who built the kingdom of God by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world, taking its pain into his own body, dying the death it sought, and rising again to remind us that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hate, and that with God, all good things are possible.” *[David Lose, Christ the King, in “Working Preacher” online commentary, 2015].*

So here's a bit of practical advice about living out our witness to Christ as Lord. In 2013, the day after the Boston Marathon bombings, *Slate* magazine ran a short article on Fred Rogers, creator and host of the PBS award-winning children's program “Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood”. The article described a powerful message Fred learned from his mother. He said: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” To this day, especially in times of “disaster,” I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.”

That simple message of hope has appeared over and over again in print and in the media following national tragedies in the U.S. - in 1995 after the Oklahoma City Bombings; in 2001 after the September 11th attacks; and in 2012 after the Aurora movie theater shootings and the Newtown elementary school shootings. Look for the helpers. Look for the people who care. There is still much good amid the bad.

So by all means, look for the helpers, because that is one place we will find hope to help us “keep on keeping on”, hope to help us persevere in the midst of clashing kingdoms. But go one step further and become a helper. Become a helper in bringing God's kingdom more fully into this world. The 3rd grade class at St. Stephen's School at the Cathedral in Harrisburg decided, after the events in Paris last week, that they would do 137 acts of kindness – one each for the 129 people who died in Paris and one each for the 8 terrorists. They are keeping a written record of their 137 acts of kindness. The students issued a challenge to the clergy of the diocese when we were gathered together in conference in Lancaster this week, the challenge to join them in doing our own 137 acts of kindness. Those children understand the truth and power of God's

kingdom of love coming, and they are following Jesus' voice. They know the way of the One whom they serve.

We who claim Jesus as Lord of our lives are called to live differently. Not out of reactive and defensive fear, but out of proactive and expansive love. Not out of assumed scarcity, but out of the truth of God's unmatched abundance and faithfulness. Not from a place of withdrawal and suspicion, but from a place of engagement, radical hospitality, and welcome of the stranger.

God's kingdom coming calls for us to live as committed and courageous Christians.

"Lord, teach us to walk your kingdom way. Take us by the hand and walk with us on your kingdom way."

Come, even now, Lord Jesus, come. AMEN.