

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

November 22, 2015

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

John 18:33-37

"Not Your Usual Kingdom"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

It's probably not fair to criticize Pilate for not knowing that Jesus is, indeed, king of all creation. After all, the evidence pointed to something quite different. The evidence would say that Jesus was **nothing more than a traveling preacher** whose **luck had run out**.

Now he's under arrest, accused of blasphemy and of claiming to be king of the Jews. No wonder Pilate couldn't see the truth. He represents the Roman Empire, the most powerful empire on earth. To him, this Jesus is nothing more than a nuisance, like a bothersome fly.

How was Pilate to know that Jesus is indeed a king?

How could he know that one day, as our reading from Daniel tells us, *"Jesus will sit on a glorious throne, and all peoples and nations will serve him."*

Pilate was a politician. When he asked Jesus, *"What is truth?"* we can hear the cynical voice of a seasoned politician who knows that those in power can control what passes for truth.

But **Jesus bears witness** to a **different truth**. **Not** the **manipulated, shifting truth** of human society, but the absolute truth of God.

It's no wonder Pilate couldn't see it. As Jesus himself said, his kingdom is not from this world.

The kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus, is **totally different** from any kingdom or world power that has ever been seen on the stage of history.

Any kingdom or nation worth the name strikes fear into the hearts of those who aren't part of that kingdom. But no one back in first Century Palestine would have been afraid of Jesus and his ragtag band of disciples. In fact, they were more of a joke than anything else.

The soldiers who were going to nail him to the cross had **fun with the idea of Jesus as a king**, remember? They put a crown of thorns and a purple robe on him and pretended to bow down to him as a great king, knowing that, **compared to the might and majesty of Caesar**, this **Jesus was a nobody**.

The people who came out to watch the crucifixion jeered at Jesus: *"If you're really the king, why don't you use your power and come down from the cross. Then maybe we'll believe in you."*

But you see, Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

And the values and characteristics of His kingdom are diametrically opposite to any world power before or since.

In Jesus' kingdom, those who want to be great, must be the servants of all. In His kingdom, it's not about power and wealth and being on top. No, in Christ's kingdom, it's **all about serving**, about admitting our powerlessness, about sharing the love of our king with all people, great and small.

Pilate didn't see it; and you and I often don't see it either, because **we humans are so easily dazzled** by the nations of this world; by their **size** and **might** and **sheer ability to overwhelm all opposition**.

The power and pageantry of the Roman Empire was truly something to behold. **No one had ever seen such a powerful nation**.

People thought it would last forever. Of course, they were wrong.

Today, **we live in the most powerful nation on earth**. It's **hard to imagine a world without the United States**, isn't it? Who knows, maybe our nation will last till the end of the world. But there are no guarantees.

When Jesus began preaching, he declared, "*The kingdom of God is at hand.*" He ushered in a new kingdom – a kingdom that **seems so insignificant, that it's almost invisible**.

The signs that usually indicate a powerful kingdom or nation are things like a **mighty army**, a **large and growing GNP**, or the **ability to force smaller, weaker nations to do what we want**.

But the signs that announce Jesus' kingdom are quite different:

- the hungry are fed,
- the sick are healed,
- strangers are welcomed, and
- forgiveness, peace, and grace are preached to all people.

Jesus' kingdom is invisible to Pilate or anyone else who judges by the world's standards. But it is the **ONLY KINGDOM THAT WILL LAST FOREVER**.

The peaceful kingdom of Jesus Christ is still here today, and it will still be here long after all great and mighty nations have passed away.

Pilate couldn't see it. The Jewish leaders who brought charges against Jesus couldn't see it.

And the people who shouted "*crucify him!*" certainly **couldn't discern the kingdom of God that was starting to take shape right in their midst**.

But **you and I should be different**. We have been **given eyes of faith**.

And if we're attentive and can **keep from being distracted by the dazzle and flash of the kingdoms and powers of this world**, we can often **catch glimpses** of the Kingdom of God

Where do we find the kingdom of God?

We **won't find it if we focus on** churches that seem powerful and "successful" in human terms: the great glass cathedrals, the mega-church campuses offering everything and anything to fill the **consumer-driven needs** of the people they see as "customers".

You know, churches with Starbucks in the lobby, and a drive-through window for communion. That's not where you're likely to see the kingdom of Jesus.

Instead, we see it – we catch glimpses of it – wherever we find people living together under the grace of God. Where Christians forgive and are forgiven – there is Jesus' kingdom.

We **see it in little things, things that may seem almost insignificant.**

Where believers serve the poor, the hungry, the least and the lost – **there is Christ's kingdom.**

I often tell parents of teenagers that they need to use peripheral vision to catch their teenagers enjoying family time.

And that's also useful if you want to see signs of the Kingdom. It's **better to use your peripheral vision**, rather than trying to look straight on.

See all those youth and adults working together to prepare and serve a free harvest dinner to 490 guests from our community? **YOU'RE LOOKING AT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.**

See that **10th-grader** down on the floor playing with the four-year-olds in a Sunday School classroom? You're **seeing** a SMALL PORTRAIT OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM.

Where sinners gather together as equals, hungry to hear God's word and receive the gifts of Christ's body and blood – **there is the kingdom of Jesus** – a kingdom that is not from this world.

God's kingdom often turns the truths of this world upside down. Every young person or adult who's been on one of our Tanzania Mission Teams has experienced this reality as we interact with our African brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are always amazed and **humbled by** the **Christian joy and passion** so many of them show, **even though they seem to have so little to be thankful for.**

For me, one of the most powerful visions of Christ's kingdom was when we worshipped with the Lutherans in the town of Monduli during the 2005 trip. The building was certainly not impressive compared to our church. It was definitely a work in progress.

And yet, as I assisted with communion, as I looked out and saw people **streaming forward to the altar** to kneel and receive the body and blood of Christ, I knew I was looking at **a powerful sign of the kingdom of God on earth.**

Here were the members of our team, **Christians from the richest, most powerful nation on earth;** kids with **more money in their pockets** than most of these Africans **earn in several months or even in a year.**

And yet, **our white outstretched hands were no different from their brown ones.** At the Lord's table, we were **no richer, no better** than the **poorest cow-herder or laborer.**

We were all **exactly the same.** And we knew it.

Because, at the Lord's table, **we felt,** in a way we had never experienced before, that **WE ARE ALL BEGGARS FOR GOD'S GRACE.**

At the Lord's table, we are all **united in our hunger** for the **forgiveness and grace that comes with the bread and wine.**

And, then as both team members and African Christians returned to their places, they were all equally rich because they had **received the same free gift: the bread of life that is Jesus Christ.**

There in that half-finished church building, we had **gotten a true foretaste of the feast to come:** a glorious glimpse of the kingdom over which Jesus will reign forever and ever.

A kingdom where **the things that divide us melt away – and we are all one in Christ.**

It is **certainly not a kingdom of this world.** The **eyes of this world can't even see it.**

But, **with the guiding of the Holy Spirit, YOU AND I CAN SEE IT.**

And, better yet, **we can participate in that kingdom** whenever we **follow the example of King Jesus,** whose **only throne** on this earth was a **cross of sacrifice for others.**

And even if we have no special gifts, we are valuable in that kingdom, because, as Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "Everybody can be great. Because anyone can serve."

As we follow our king, we too will seek to quietly serve those around us.

And we will **KNOW THE JOY OF BELONGING TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD.** Amen.