

Christ the King Sunday (B)

John 18:33-37

About 15 years ago, some college students invented a game called “the 6 degrees of Kevin Bacon.” It was based on the idea that you could link the actor Kevin Bacon to any other actor through 6 or fewer people...

This got people to thinking about how easy it is to connect virtually anybody to a famous person. That is, you know someone who knows someone ... and in less than 6 people you’ve reached that famous person.

Well, the same can also be said about people in some kind of terrible distress. While it may not be happening to me, I probably know someone who knows someone – and pretty soon, no matter what the problem is, I’ve reached a person facing a terribly difficult situation.

Lately, though, times have been so tough for so many people that for most of us, there are no degrees of separation anymore. Virtually all of us, or at least someone we personally know, is dealing directly with some intensely difficult situation. For some, it’s because they’ve lost a job, or because the threat of losing their job hangs over their heads. Others face difficult health problems, exacerbated by the fact that they either have no health insurance, or that they have to fight with the health insurance company while they’re desperately ill in order to get the treatment they need. And many of us have a friend or loved one who has been sent, or is about to be sent, into harms way in Afghanistan or Iraq, and we’re more aware than ever of the potential threat to their lives there.

What’s worse is that we’re not sure how long these tough situations are going to last. We’re not sure how badly they’ll ultimately effect us or the people we love. And we struggle each day to keep these difficult situations from becoming the central reality in our lives.

Today, as we conclude the Church year by celebrating Christ as our king, it may seem at first glance that celebrating the glory of a king is kind of detached from the tough times and situations we’re dealing with just now. And yet, as our Gospel reading makes clear, Jesus too, was dealing with a tough situation – in fact, a tough situation which killed him.

Actually, all of our readings today were written during extraordinarily tough times

for God's people. That's not always obvious from the short passages we've just read, but times and situations were tough for:

- A) the people who first heard Daniel's vision ...
- B) the first century Christians in western Turkey to whom the Book of Revelation was addressed ...
- C) Jesus, who knew exactly where this discussion with Pilate was leading ...

Most of these writings are called "apocalyptic" literature. In fact, that's the name of the book of Revelation in Greek – the "apocalypse of John". But because of the way we've used the word "apocalypse" in our modern movies and literature, we often think that "apocalypse" is about how things come to a violent and hopeless end.

And indeed, when the Bible uses the word "apocalypse" it does refer to an ending. But mostly, it refers to the "final" or "ultimate" things. It refers to the ultimate reality that matters more than anything else. And that ultimate reality is always the reality of God's reign, no matter what's going on in the present moment. A true, biblical apocalypse is always about a final end to suffering and evil, and so it's always an ending filled with hope and restoration.

That's why if you carefully read books like Daniel or Revelation, you'll notice two important things:

- 1) when times and situations are tough, faithful people still suffer and die; but
- 2) the tough times never ultimately win; and they never last, not because they just wear out, but because ultimately, God's reign overcomes them ...

As one of my Pastor colleagues likes to point out, the basic message of books like Revelation is simply: "God wins!" No matter how bad things are, and no matter how tough the times get, God never abandons his people. And in the end, God wins.

The real message of our crucified savior reigning as a king in our lives is not that Jesus, having suffered for us, will somehow keep us from suffering or facing tough times. Rather, Jesus faces the toughest situations and even a horrible death in order to make it clear that no tough times can ultimately triumph over God's power to save us and give us new life.

God's power and presence in our lives doesn't stop the suffering and problems we face. But God's presence and promise gives us hope and strength to deal with the tough times we face, just as the vision and promise of God gave ancient people strength to endure, and just as God's promise and presence gave Jesus the strength to face evil and death.

As we consider what it means to live in the kingdom of a crucified king, Jesus calls us also to boldly face the future with the confidence not that things will surely be better soon, but rather with the confidence that God's presence and promise will give us strength to face the tough times and situations which may continue to plague us and the ones we love.

But how do we live into the reality of God's reign in our lives when we have to deal with tough times and difficult situations? Well, it's often easier said than done. But we can begin to live into the reality of God's kingdom right now, even while enduring tough times, by:

- A) sticking together and staying connected to one another – God's people of all times and places have found God's presence and strength in the community of believers God called them to be a part of, even and especially when the community was being persecuted ...
- B) holding on to the vision of God's promises, instead of being consumed by the problems of the moment – this was the point of vision's like Daniel's – to lift people beyond the moment and remind them that the problems of the present moment were not the ultimate reality ...
- C) courageously acting on their faith, instead of ducking and running for cover – in their best times, ancient Christians realized that the best way to live into God's reign was to make God's reign present in the world, by showing Jesus' love to others and by confessing with their words and deeds and resources that God's reality mattered more than what they were going through at the moment. The same is true for us

...

Times are tough today, just as they've been tough for generations before us. But God didn't abandon generations before us, and God won't abandon us, either. And today, we remember that God's kingdom isn't just pie in the sky for tomorrow, but a present reality we can live in right now, even in the midst of tough times. And so Jesus calls us again today to live in the light of God's reign right now by staying connected to God and to one another, and by courageously showing our faith in God's presence and promise by the way we live and speak and serve.

Amen.