

Good Friday, April 14, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“My kingdom is not from this world.” Jesus and Pilate stand face to face. In this encounter two kings and two kingdoms come nose to nose with each other. Pilate is the Roman governor in Judea, an outpost and territory of the Roman Empire. As governor he acts with the same authority as Caesar, the Roman emperor. Pilate’s authority is final. Backing him up is the combined force of the Roman Legion, the most powerful military machine on earth.

Jesus, this other king who hardly seems fit for the role, claims a band of followers drawn from the bottom of society: tax collectors, fishermen, single women, lepers, the lame and the blind. For a few years now this Jesus has been going about the country proclaiming a coming kingdom of God. In this kingdom the poor will be lifted up, the rich sent away empty, the hungry fed with good things. No wonder he’s attracted the attention of those whose self-interest always includes making sure the rich get to keep all they have, and the poor have only just enough to keep them from rising up in revolt.

Some of those who followed Jesus heard this coming kingdom of God to mean social and political insurrection. They bristled with excitement to take up arms and throw off the oppressors. Judas may have been such a zealot whose disappointment in Jesus’ refusal to mount an insurrection led him to betray Jesus into the hands of authorities, thus sparking the hoped-for rebellion. But Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world; if it were my followers should be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” Jesus disavows the use of force to bring in his kingdom.

Some read Jesus words slightly differently, choosing to hear him say, “My kingdom is not of this world.” A little change in preposition. “From this world,” to “of this world.” When we hear it like that, “of this world,” we might conclude that Jesus’ kingdom is entirely spiritual. That he is only dealing with things like heaven and eternal life. Down here, in the real world, in the day to day mess of economy and trying to make a living and politics and kingdoms and wars and famine and climate change and justice; all of this isn’t touched by Jesus and his kingdom. Because his kingdom of is not “of” this world.

But I believe that’s the wrong way to read Jesus’ words to Pilate. Jesus says his kingdom does not originate from this world. It is not born in the halls of earthly, military power as all other kingdoms are born. His kingdom comes from somewhere else. His kingdom comes from God. But while Jesus’ kingdom is not from this world, Jesus’ kingdom is entirely for this world.

Jesus’ kingdom is for this world out of love. Earlier in his gospel John writes, “For God so love the world that he gave his only Son.” His love is not other-worldly, to take us out of the mess of injustice and cruelty and transport us to heaven. Just the opposite. Jesus is God’s final answer to all earthly kingdoms whose power comes from the sword, or the Tomahawk, or the IED, or the bomb vest inside a Coptic Christian church, or the Mother of All Bombs. If Jesus’ kingdom was from this world all of these, and even more, would be at our disposal.

Rather, Jesus submits himself to the power of kingdoms that are from this world. He does so willingly, freely. He is no pawn caught in a terrible power game. “You would have no power over me,” Jesus says to Pilate, “unless it had been given you from above.”

Pilate is the pawn here. Caught in his own endless downward spiral of political and military machination that is the inevitable end of all earthly kingdoms born from this world.

I believe it's crucial for all of us to acknowledge our own participation in how this world is the way it is and the reason for God's dramatic intervention of Jesus on the cross. For there is a way of hearing this gospel as just so much past history or even as distant from our own experience. Yes, Pilate was cowardly and the Roman Empire was cruel. Yes, terrorists blow up churches and governments drop bombs on civilians and use drones to advance their cause. Still, it can seem so far away. But this reality of violence goes much deeper than that. It's part of each and every one of us. We all react with anger when we are wronged. We all seek to maximize our own advantage. We are prone to associate with others who are only like us, who will stand with us against threats from the outside. We find it far too easy to de-humanize and demonize those who differ from us; those who disagree with us. I believe the reality is that each of us could easily find some excuse to drive someone like Jesus out because he confronts us with just those things that we use to prop ourselves up and prop up the world we have created for ourselves. He is and always remains a threat to our carefully constructed defenses. Unless we see ourselves in the crowd calling for Jesus' death, unless we see ourselves with hammer and nail in our own hands we will miss the heart of this story.

Jesus' death on the cross is God's emphatic declaration of love for this world. All attempts to bring in a divine kingdom based on earthly power are turned away. For earthly kingdoms can finally only divide us from each other. Our loyalty to an earthly kingdom will inevitably clash with others who are loyal to their own kingdoms. But on the cross Jesus loves the whole world, no exceptions. By death on the cross God ends the ways of violence perpetuated in his name. God embraces in love all peoples, from every kingdom, every tribe and clan and ethnicity.

We, who are the followers of Jesus, are called to live for the world, though not from the world. We are called to see that Jesus' death on the cross is for us, for our part in putting him there. We need the cross as a constant and daily reminder of the way God goes about healing the divisions and violence in the world, but submitting to its power as the only way to overcome it and show us a still more excellent way. That way is known as The Way of the Cross. Amen.