

“Full Circle”

This isn't just strange... it's jarring. Here we are with no small amount of self-congratulation, struggling to hold back swarming hordes of Christmas elves who are poised to offer a royal welcome to Santa Claus as he, in his mysterious and inimitable manner, proceeds to occupy every commercial venue in the Western World... simultaneously. But all of us Pilgrims at Plymouth instead insist on putting the pie back in piety as a means of celebrating with appropriate joy and solemnity the feast of Thanksgiving before we are all swept away by the seasonal tsunami known as the Yule tide. Good for us, right?

And meanwhile the New Revised Common Lectionary, which has been meaningfully and methodically leading us this fall through the Gospel According to Mark, brings us to this the final Sunday of the church year and offers up as a gospel lesson... what? Something from John's account of Good Friday!

All of this reminds me of when I was the president of my church youth group when I was in high school. My senior year our regular Sunday evening meeting fell on April Fool's Day: so in the spirit of April Fool's Day we announced a Halloween party and had everybody come in costume; then when they arrived they discovered it was actually a Christmas party. Now here we all are in this season of encroaching Christmas trying to celebrate Thanksgiving with a lesson from Holy Week. Anybody confused? I know I am!

We can be forgiven for finding this strange. And to tell you the truth I almost ducked it entirely and elected to preach on one of the other lessons; but they weren't much help, either. I've also discovered over the years that there's something about the “play it as it lies” nature of the lectionary that usually offers some sort of blessing if you wrestle with it long enough. So... I've been wrestling. And maybe I've just started to hallucinate, but I think there's something strangely helpful here about how this particular lesson brings us full circle. Maybe it's that once the arbitrary becomes customary it almost seems to make sense... in the unusual way that church things make sense.

To get at this we have to get our heads into the Gospel of John. That makes for a tough transition, and we have to remind ourselves of a few things.

In terms of style, John is completely different from Mark. Mark is tense and terse, with a compact narrative and a minimalist style. Few words... tiny pieces of tradition strung together like beads on a necklace... a dark, mysterious and challenging message about what it means to follow Jesus: that's Mark. John is the opposite: loquacious, spinning out long stories that take a chapter or even longer to tell, with extended sections of sometimes confusing dialogue and rich imagery that describes the full and abundant life to which followers of Jesus are called.

Mark is direct, immediate and abrupt; John is indirect, people commonly talk past one another and irony rules at a leisurely pace.

The Jesus of Mark's Gospel is a mysterious figure. Those who gain a glimpse into who he is often get it wrong, and those who get it right are admonished not to tell anybody else. To follow Jesus is to follow him to the cross, to die with him. In John a rich and illuminating variety of poetic images is invoked to convey who Jesus is: the true vine, the light of the world, the bread of life, the living water, the Good Shepherd, the way, the truth and the life, and so on. To know Jesus is to follow him; to follow him is to share in his glory.

So remember that we're in a different world of ironic interplay as we read this lesson from John. On the surface of things, Pilate is in charge and Jesus is on trial; but Pilate is the one who ends up running around. Jesus is inside the praetorium, the Jerusalem fortress to which Pilate comes from Caesarea just to keep an eye on things during the Passover. The religious authorities who have accused Jesus are outside the building. They want Pilate to judge Jesus, but they will not enter the praetorium, because entering a Roman building would make them ritually unclean for Passover. So Pilate ends up playing the errand boy, running back and forth between those who charge Jesus and where Jesus is on trial. As we pick up the story today, Pilate has just re-entered his headquarters to interrogate Jesus with regard to the charge that Jesus is the King of the Jews—a charge of treason against the Roman Emperor.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. The answer is yes, but not in the way that Pilate is asking the question. So Jesus counters, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replies, “I am

not a Jew, am I?” Obviously Pilate didn’t come up with this title or charge—of course he’s been talking to other people. “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Let’s cut to the chase here. Why do these people hate you?

Jesus’ response is actually almost helpful: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the [religious leaders]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” In essence, I am not a king of this world in any way that you would realize or recognize. My rule is that of a servant. My power is the power of love. My people don’t fight; they bear witness to the truth.

Pilate misses all of this entirely, playing a verbal game of gotcha: “So you are a king?” Aha! Jesus responds, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” The word for “testify” is the word from which we get our English word, “martyr.” Jesus will bear witness to the truth of the triumph of self-giving love by surrendering his life. Those whom Jesus came to call to himself can understand this: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate unwittingly volunteers that he is not among those who belong to the truth when he responds, “What is truth?”

This strange and ironic encounter is a clear and powerful reminder that the whole of the Jesus story, the entire circle of the church year that begins on the first Sunday of Advent and culminates near Thanksgiving with what has come to be called “the Reign of Christ Sunday,” is about the deathless power of love. Love is never more powerful than when it appears completely helpless: in the suffering figure of Christ on the cross or in a newborn baby lying in a manger. When it comes to issues of life and death, the beginning and the ending, our source and our destination, the first and the last word are the same: love. And all the empires of history crumble into nothing before that most fundamental reality of our existence.

Pilate and his legions are not in charge. We would not even remember Pontius Pilate but for this brief encounter with Jesus. Pilate is an obscure footnote of history. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. That’s the message of “The Reign of Christ Sunday.” That reminder is the reason we jump awkwardly into John to close out the church year.

We have come full circle. In the prayer that is a part of our annual Pilgrim Thanksgiving service we read together these words: “... we offer

you our thanks that you have brought us through the circuit of another year, and that according to your promise seedtime and harvest have not failed.” The cycles and seasons of our lives are a reminder of the faithfulness and constancy of God amid all the changes and variability we experience. And the circle of the year encompasses our lives as though in an embrace.

We think about how things are the same or different: people who have come into our lives during the past year, and those who have departed. But what remains is the changeless love of God as the foundation of who we are. And so it is that love for which we give thanks most profoundly, even as we enumerate the many different ways in which it is made known to us.

Occasionally someone will ask me where to start with God. Maybe they want to learn how to pray, or maybe they are trying to get in touch with that part of themselves that is spirit, or maybe they are just trying out the whole God idea and casting about for supporting evidence. I always recommend gratitude as the place to start. If you want to connect or reconnect with the presence of God in your life, reflect on things for which you are grateful. The more you do it, the easier it becomes; the easier it becomes, the more you want to do it. And the more you want to do it the more you find yourself drawing nearer to God, whose presence you can come to experience in the holiness of life itself.

As E. B. White is said to have said, “I wake each morning torn between two impulses: the impulse to savor the world, and the impulse to save it. It makes it hard to plan the day.” Thanksgiving is a reminder to begin by savoring the world, but not to get stuck there. For genuine gratitude overflows into a spirit of generous sharing. And we’re celebrating that here today, as well.

Now thank we all our God: with heart and hands and voices, with prayers and hymns and anthems, with pledges and offerings and pie. The last word has to be pie.

Amen

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