

Sunday, November 21, 2021 – “Who’s in Charge?”

– Bible Study & Reflection on John 18:33-37

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passages from 2 Samuel 23:1-7 (*Common English Bible*) & John 18:33-37 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

¹These are David’s last words:

This is the declaration of Jesse’s son David,
the declaration of a man raised high,
a man anointed by the God of Jacob,
a man favored by the strong one of Israel.

²The LORD’s spirit speaks through me;
his word is on my tongue.

³Israel’s God has spoken,
Israel’s rock said to me:

“Whoever rules rightly over people,
whoever rules in the fear of God,

⁴ is like the light of sunrise
on a morning with no clouds,
like the bright gleam after the rain
that brings grass from the ground.”

⁵Yes, my house is this way with God!
He has made an eternal covenant with me,
laid out and secure in every detail.

Yes, he provides every one of my victories
and brings my every desire to pass.

⁶But despicable people are like thorns,
all of them good for nothing,
because they can’t be carried by hand.

⁷No one can touch them,
except with iron bar or the shaft of a spear.
They must be burned up with fire right on the spot!

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters^(a) again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “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 Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Welcome to one of the most political Sunday’s of the Church’s liturgical year. Perhaps like me, you are exhausted by politics. And isn’t true that congregations get nervous and edgy whenever they hear a “political sermon”?

Sorry. On the Reign of Christ Sunday, politics is put on the table by the scripture we read, and politics intrudes into the Church’s conversation. So it’s hard for a preacher not to be political on this Sunday. By “political,” I mean to say that a basic question is set before us: Who is in charge?

Much of the time we wish that politics and spirituality could be disconnected. The modern state, to protect its sovereignty, relegates religion and spirituality to purely private matters, personal concerns. Log into your favorite news site, and there you will read about politicians and their activity, or perhaps Hollywood stars and their antics, but not about Christ and his kingdom. “Religion is fine,” we seem to say, “when kept in its place, rendered private and personal. That’s okay.” This means that spirituality and religion become what we do when we are not attending to the really important things in life like politics and economics, money and power.

On the Reign of Christ Sunday, the Church gets explicitly political, and we ponder the frightful questions of whether or not anybody is in charge and, if somebody is in charge, who is that somebody?

Appropriately, our First Scripture Reading is the last words of Israel’s most prominent politician, King David. At the end of his long and glorious reign, David speaks about the blessings of good government. Good governance is based not upon political expediency, but rather upon the work and will of God. All forms of human organization, all standards of right and wrong, must answer to the One who created and ordered the world.

We Americans with our separation of church and state cringe whenever anyone even hints at a state-sponsored, established religion. We already dealt with a theocracy when the Puritans were running the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And we remember the Salem witch trials. Keep religion separate from politics.

And yet, Second Samuel keeps stressing, in its rich, varied narratives, that the power of any government and their leaders is relative to the supreme governance of God. At least in Israel’s history, there is one true and rightful ruler, the God who made heaven and earth. David was a great king, but God’s truthful prophets like Nathan did not hesitate to call the king to account for his actions. Very few kings in Israel’s history are considered to be completely righteous before God. Most of Israel’s kings, other than David, are portrayed as bunglers and incompetents. Politics, for any good that it accomplishes, is presented by Second Samuel as subservient to the demands and commands of the Living God of Israel. Maybe that’s why we should ponder if one of the reasons why politics so often becomes demonic today is that there’s nothing to qualify our politics and no one to keep government in its place. Separation of religions and the state, right? And so, our politicians answer to no one but the opinion polls, and some of them don’t worry even about the polls.

Perhaps you will agree with me that many people in power (for that’s what politics is all about – power) are tempted to believe that they are very important, very powerful people, in charge. The last words of David, as well as the remembrance of Christ before Governor Pontius Pilate, remind the Church of our ultimate allegiance, or highest loyalty. In whatever position we find ourselves, in power or not, we are answerable, accountable to God.

Christ stands before Pontius Pilate. Christ stands before him as the accused, the powerless rabbi who, like all of those on the margins of society, are impotent before the judgments of the state. And yet, subtly, in the interrogation by Pilate, power subtly shifts from this powerful gentile who thinks he’s in charge, to Jesus who appears to be in charge of nothing.

That's politics Jesus-style. And like Pilate, we stand before Jesus and ask, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). We know who the truth is. We just have to be willing to stand for the truth, and follow Jesus, no matter what it costs us.

Jesus is Lord, and God is good!

Blessings & Happy Thanksgiving,

Pastor Greg Rupright