

**Sermon for November 22, 2015 (Christ the King amended, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 5:13-20; Psalm 93; John 18:33-38

Title: Not From This World

The Lord Jesus spoke to Pilate and said, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting...” (John 18:36).

My dear friends: what does it mean for our primary and first allegiance to be to the kingdom of God? And how does that change the way we look at life?

Today, this final Sunday of the Church Year, is known to us as Christ the King Sunday. We conclude and wrap up the wheel of the year by recognizing and celebrating the Church’s claim that ALL of time is under the careful and merciful governance of Christ, who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Now, when we talk about kings and lords and kingdoms, then we are talking about power and the exercise of power.

So let’s be clear about what this day means.

To claim Christ as King of kings is to say that Christ is in fact the most powerful one of all.

It is a bold claim, and it is an extremely odd, peculiar and strange one as well!

After this exchange in today’s Gospel, Pilate decided to have the Lord stripped, flogged, scourged and – finally – crucified as a common thief or rebel.

What kind of king is this who gives his life away without a fight?
What kind of power is exercised within the realm of his kingdom?

We can answer that question by looking closely at these final few verses from the Letter of James.

Today, we end our 9 week study of James. And we find that he ends this bizarre little Letter by addressing a random collection of pastoral concerns.

It's a very strange and unusual way to end a Letter – with no personal greetings, no farewell, no final words of advice.

But this ending does, however, tell us something important about the kind of power that is at work within the kingdom of God.

What is the famous verse that is found here? “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

My friends: what is power?

Is it the ability to force others to do what you want? Is it the strength to ensure that YOUR will is accomplished?

Power on this earth is so alluring, so tempting.

It promises so much, but nearly always delivers so little.

The fact is that most human beings place their hope and trust in the exercise of earthly power.

Just look at how we approach politics. People think that if they can only change WHO happens to be in charge, then everything will get better.

Isn't this why so many will invest weeks and months and YEARS of their lives, not even to mention their money, in order to get THEIR candidate elected?

They say “if only MY leader can be in power, then everything will get better!”

What a sad waste! You would think that we humans would know better by now!

There are thousands of years of evidence which clearly show that this is false!

Each new leader will make some changes for the better and each will make some harmful changes.

The truth is: elect this person or that one.

It makes so little difference in the long run.

Now, don't misunderstand me. The Church must be involved in politics.

We have a clear calling to stand for a just society which functions honestly and treats all citizens equally, which protects the weak and the poor.

No, it is not politics which the Church opposes, but rather politicians!

Because we know better, don't we?!

We know that every person is a sinner – even those running for office!
And we know that power and sin mix together to create a very nasty concoction.

Back to the Letter of James: what again does James say?
“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Right here at the end of James, we can see what power looks like within the realm of Christ – and it is so very different from kingdoms of this world.

How do we see the Lord’s power in the kingdom of God? We see it:
In the power of prayer and faith.
In the power of confession and forgiveness.
In the power of truth and persuasion.

You see, in this kingdom of Christ, the ends NEVER justify the means.
In this realm of God, the means ARE the ends.
HOW we do what we do is what matters.

Let me tell us a story of a time when the power of Christ intersected with the power of this world.

In the year 1219, St. Francis of Assisi traveled to Egypt, to the front lines of battle in the 5th Crusade. He went there to make peace, to use the power of Christ to make peace where the power of the Crusader’s sword had been ineffective.

In his mind, Francis went there to bring back one who wandered from the truth.
Francis went forth in prayer and faith.

Egypt was controlled by the famous Sultan of Egypt, Malek Al-Kamil. With stunning bravery, St. Francis and one of his little brothers, a Friar Minor, approached the enemy lines outside the city of Damietta with a request to speak with the Sultan.

Now, just picture this in your mind! Can you imagine what those heavily-armed, battle-scarred Muslim soldiers thought when they looked down and saw this short, dirty little man with the funny haircut who carried nothing with him, but who asked with complete boldness and audacity for a direct audience with the Sultan?!

We have no idea as to why exactly, but his request was granted. Understand that Francis was perfectly ready and prepared for martyrdom. He knew very well that he was risking his life by such a venture, and he was ready to lose his life in this way for the sake of Christ.

This meeting between Francis and the Sultan in the year 1219 is an historical fact. But the reports of what actually occurred in this meeting are a bit less certain.

It is said that a very civil and respectful dialogue ensued between Francis and the Sultan, along with the imams in his court. Both sides tried in vain to convert the other. Finally, it is reported that Francis offered to undergo a trial by fire to prove the validity of the Gospel.

Francis offered to walk through fire in order to prove that Christ was with him, as long as the Sultan's imams were willing to do the same in the name of Allah.

Now, that sounds crazy, right? But there was a method to his madness.

Back in the days of Muhammad, when he was beginning to gather a group of followers around him in the first decades of the 7th century, it is said that he challenged a group of Christians to a similar trial. Leaders of both groups would walk through fire; the ones who came out unscathed were the ones who had God on their side, the ones who spoke the truth about God.

If you know anything about Muhammad, then you will know that this is clearly a challenge that he would relish. But those Arabian Christians declined, saying that they did not wish to put Christ to the test in this way. And so Muhammad left feeling justified, that his message was indeed inspired and that the faith of the Christians was not REAL faith, since they were too afraid to face the test.

600 years later in Egypt, perhaps Francis was intending to make up for the seeming failure of those timid Christians in their meeting with Muhammad.

And so with his characteristic boldness, he offered to walk through fire with his counterparts, but this time the imams refused.

They said that they did not wish to put Allah to the test in this way.

Francis won the respect of the Sultan. He and his friars were treated as honored guests, and they were given free passage to travel throughout the Sultan's lands in peace.

Of course, by the standards of this world, Francis failed in his mission.
He did not convert the Sultan. And he did not bring peace by ending the Crusades.

Of course, by the standards of this world, Jesus failed in his mission.
He was rejected by most of his people. He did not usher in the messianic age.
Judged and condemned to death, he did not persuade Pilate to see the truth.

How then can we claim him as our King?

How?

Because everything is different within the kingdom of God.
Here, strength is made perfect in weakness.
Fear is overcome by faith.
Violence gives way to the message of peace.
The means themselves become the ends.
And the executed rebel reigns as King.

James tells us that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.
You and I will never be able to measure the effectiveness of prayer.
We will never be able to prove the power of faith in Christ.

But, if you are willing to take the risk and to bet your life on the reality of this kingdom of Christ, you will discover a power at work within you – and around you – that defies all normal human logic.

But you must be willing to take the risk. To walk to the front lines of battle like Francis armed with nothing but the peace of God.
To confess your failings and to trust in the reality of forgiveness.
To pursue the truth of God and not be fooled by the promises of any human leader.
To live AS IF the One crucified under Pontius Pilate is in fact alive and present today.

Will you take that risk? Will you pledge your primary and first allegiance to the kingdom of God?

Christ is King, but his kingdom is NOT from this world. Thanks be to God! Amen.