

## Don't Smack Me with Your Ruler!

[Text - John 18:33 -37]

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Next Sunday, a new Church Year begins with *Advent*, the Season of anticipating and awaiting Christ's birth. Today is the last Sunday of this Church Year, the day when we anticipate and await the conclusive, all-inclusive Reign of Jesus Christ. Basically, each Church Year begins and ends with a spirit of *expectancy*; though this morning, we await Christ coming among us - not as a tiny baby in a lowly manger, but in the fullness of Divine power and glory.

Now I'll admit, that the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas is far more popular than the idea of Christ returning to rule the world with resolute authority! It's certainly more fun to celebrate a baby's birthday, than to anticipate a ruler's ultimate judgment day! And of course Christmas is infused with images of Santa bringing presents to well-behaved children; while the impending Reign of Christ is often intermingled with images Satan bringing plagues and pestilence to badly-behaved sinners! That being said, Christ's coming among us - whether it be as a peaceful baby or as a powerful ruler - isn't about us picking which scenario we prefer; it's about you and me choosing to follow a new way of living. It's about recognizing that the Way of Jesus Christ is radically different from the way of this world.

In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus says to Pontius Pilate, "My realm is not from this world. If my realm were from this world, my followers would be fighting...but my realm is not from here." One notable difference between the Realm of Christ and earthly realms, is how those realms are established and maintained. I can't think of any sovereign rule - current or historic - that has been instituted and sustained without the use, or the threat, of force. And any nation that has had an expansive or worldwide influence, has done so by way of military dominance. Even those among us who might contend that the United States is a shining exception to this - that *our* world leadership comes from a higher moral standing - must also acknowledge that our government annually spends more on military and weapons, than the combined total of the next *nineteen* top countries. This accounts for 47% of the world's military spending.

In this world, historically and presently, military might, advanced weaponry, and political alliances are key to building and maintaining sovereign rule; yet that's not the case in the Realm of Christ. Jesus tells his followers to "put away their swords," to "turn the other cheek," and to "*love* their enemies." [Which *probably includes* not killing them.] And Jesus refuses to play politics with Pontius Pilate, or King Herod, or the religious authorities, or any other power broker of his day. That's because Jesus seeks to establish a totally different kind of realm - one which is ruled by compassion and caring, rather than fear and force.

This raises another sharp distinction between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world: Participation in Christ's Realm is *always* a matter of choice; it can never be

forced or coerced. Sad to say, there have been times - and there still are - when people attempt to force others to follow the rule of Christ. Yet whether it be through crusades or inquisitions, constitutional amendments or restrictive laws, any attempt to coerce others into accepting Christ's authority, reveals a complete misunderstanding of the Way of Jesus Christ.

Throughout his life, Jesus seeks to draw people to himself through his *positive* qualities of kindness and compassion, openness and acceptance, truthfulness and love. He never tries to force others to follow him or his ways; instead, he attracts them with his gracious welcome and his peaceful and joyful spirit. And though Jesus at times displays remarkable power, he chooses to win people over voluntarily - honoring their individuality and respecting their free will.

This points to another remarkable contrast between the reign of Christ and the reign of many worldly rulers; which is the attitude they have about themselves. Earthly rulers often try to make themselves appear "bigger than Life"; while Jesus divests himself of both heavenly and earthly glory. The Caesars not only declare themselves Supreme Emperors, they also insist that they are *gods*, building temples and shrines where people must pay them homage. In our own day, we see narcissistic world leaders who are engrossed with their own overblown perception of grandeur and power, intelligence and importance. And they treat those who disagree with them with contempt and mockery; denouncing them as "enemies of the state", or having them arrested or even brutally murdered.

Jesus, on the other hand, manifests and encourages the complete opposite within his Realm. He says, "The rulers of this world lord it over their subjects, and their 'great ones' exercise power over them; but it shall not be so among you. For whoever wishes to be great among you must be a servant, and whoever would be first among you must be a servant to all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve; and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus lives his life with the most meager of earthly possessions. When he enters this world, he is laid to rest in a borrowed manger; and at the end, he is laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. That's diametrically different from the grand palaces and spectacular pyramids in which earthly rulers live and are entombed; but Jesus Christ is a different kind of ruler. He comes to establish a realm where *people* are more important than *possessions*; where *giving* is valued above *getting*; and where greatness is measured by what we do for others, rather than what they do for us.

Which brings us to a final comparison between the Reign of Christ and the rulers of this world, which has to do with their final moments. Many earthly leaders would do anything to avoid personal loss or death, regardless of what it might cost others; but that's not how it is in the Realm of Christ. Jesus says, "No greater love has a person than this: to lay down his or her life for another." And then Jesus does just that.

We hear about people throughout history, who have died for the sake of their rulers; but

today we celebrate the ruler who dies for the sake of his people. One who is put to death because he stands in solidarity with the poor and powerless, the oppressed and the outcast. So on this Reign of Christ Sunday, we honor our awesome leader, and we anticipate and await that future day when his loving and peaceful realm will prevail over all the earth. This is not to say that you and I simply sit back and *wait* for that Realm to come. Jesus says, "The Divine Realm is at hand! It is among you and within you!" That Holy Realm grows and spreads and deepens whenever people treat one another with kindness, compassion, and mutual respect. It is present wherever Christ-like love rules in people's hearts. Jesus Christ our gracious leader shows us the way, by living a life of self-giving service and sacrifice. And on this day - and every day - Jesus invites you and me to do the same: to *be* Christ's Living Body in this world, reaching-out to all people with openness and acceptance, help and hope, light and love.