

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, April 6, 2007
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 19:1-37 (Good Friday)

Jesus' life was one of extraordinary passion. What he was passionate about was the kingdom of God. Like the prophets of Israel who came before him, Jesus envisioned what the world would look like if God was its king. In God's kingdom, the existing social, political, and economic order would be completely reversed. The first would be last, and the last would be first. In God's kingdom, no one would struggle for survival; everyone would have enough. In the kingdom of God, those who had been ostracized, neglected, or persecuted would, instead, be included, tenderly cared for, and treated with dignity and respect. The prevailing values of this alternative kingdom would be love, generosity, compassionate justice, and peace, resulting in both personal and societal transformation.

Jesus invited those around him to join him in establishing the kingdom of God. His invitation appealed to many, but especially to the poor and the marginalized. In Jesus, they found hope where there had been no hope. Even some of the powerful and the privileged, like Nicodemus, the rich, young ruler, and Joseph of Arimathea were captivated by Jesus. So palpably did the spirit of God pulse in, around, and through him that in his presence, people knew that God saw them and loved them as they were. In Jesus' presence, they were healed, fed, forgiven, and empowered. People listened to what Jesus had to say, they saw the integrity with which he lived, and they were compelled to respond - one way or another. The crowd of his followers grew. They caught Jesus' kingdom-of-God vision.

Most of the privileged and the powerful, whose security and success depended on the continuation of the existing system, didn't have much tolerance for Jesus' alternative vision. Among those who held the political and religious power, Jesus boldly and repeatedly spoke the truth about the injustices that they were either actively engaging in or passively colluding with. They, in turn, grew more and more uncomfortable with what Jesus said and did, as well as with the increasing number of people who recognized Jesus as God's anointed One, and who began to align themselves with the kingdom of God.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, whose research and insights about the last week of Jesus' life inform this sermon,* describe the collision of these two kingdoms – the kingdom of God and the kingdom of dominating power and privilege – that begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They write:**

Two processions entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of Passover, a tinderbox time in the city, with the Jewish people celebrating divine deliverance from the past Egyptian Empire while under the present Roman Empire... [L]arge and very lethal riots took place precisely at Passover in the generations before and after 30 C.E. And so, at each Passover, the Roman governor – Pilate in the time of Jesus – rode up to Jerusalem from the imperial capital Caesarea on the coast at the head of a cohort of imperial cavalry and troops to reinforce the Roman garrison in Jerusalem as a deterrent against and preparation for any possible trouble. Pilate's procession, arriving from the west, symbolized and actualized Roman imperial power.

Jesus entered the city from the east in another procession, a counter procession. Whereas Pilate rode into the city on a war horse, Jesus entered on a donkey... Implicitly in [the Gospel of] Mark ... and explicitly in Matthew ..., the symbolism makes use of Zechariah 9:9-10, which speaks of a king of peace on a donkey who will banish the war horse and battle bow from the land.

The contrast is clear: Jesus versus Pilate, the nonviolence of the kingdom of God versus the violence of empire. Two arrivals, two entrances, two processions ...

On Good Friday, the collision of two kingdoms – two visions of life on earth – takes place. The religious authorities, whose status and positions of power depend on their cooperation with the Roman Empire, hand Jesus over to Pilate. Another crowd gathers. This one is probably smaller than the crowds that followed Jesus to hear him teach, to seek his healing, or to wave palm branches as he entered Jerusalem. It's a smaller crowd, perhaps, but a vocal one, with access to Pilate's headquarters and with an agenda - to join with the chief priests and the police who insist that Jesus' allegiance to any kingdom other than Caesar's condemns him to death.

Pilate's conscience is overruled by his fear and his need to hold onto his own place within the realm of the privileged. That which is right and just is sacrificed for that which maintains the existing system of dominating power. The voice of Jesus is silenced. His non-violent resistance to an unjust empire is abruptly and brutally ended in a public execution intended to send a warning to anyone else who might be inclined to challenge the kingdom of the privileged.

Our calling as Christians, never as stark or as clear as it is on this day, is to enter into Jesus' passion – to take up our cross and follow him. Our calling is to refuse to actively engage in or to passively collude with the injustices rampant in our world dominated by kingdoms of the privileged, and to give our heart and our life to the establishment of Jesus' alternative vision – the kingdom of God on earth. Our calling is to be part of the crowd that tells the truth at all costs in personal relationships, in the workplace, and in the public arena; that moves past self-absorption to be informed about and actively engaged in changing the systems that benefit only the privileged. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be part of the crowd that both advocates and cares for the victims of unjust political, religious, and economic systems; that shares its surplus so that all have enough; that recognizes that all of us on this fragile earth need each other.

Jesus was passionate about the kingdom of God. He gave his life to it. He sacrificed his life for it. With Jesus' death, it would seem that in the collision of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God was crushed by the kingdom of dominating power and privilege.

So it would seem.

* *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*, by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominick Crossan (Harper Collins Publishers, 2006)

** "Collision Course: Jesus' Final Week," *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p. 29.

