

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

November 26, 2006

The Kingdom of Grace

John 18:36

What Pilate experienced that day was a reversal that he could never have anticipated. When Jesus is hauled before him Pilate sees a man who does not look very impressive. His hands are tied behind his back. He has obviously been roughed up. His upper lip is puffed out and one eye is swollen shut. Pilate begins by asking the standard question that he uses with all the Jewish messiahs. "Are you the King of the Jews (John 18:33)?" This one looks so ridiculous that the question seems completely unnecessary. But Pilate asks it anyway because it is his job to keep the peace. People who claim to be messiahs are usually trying to organize guerilla fighters to bring them into power. It is armed rebellion that Pilate must prevent above all else.

Jesus responds in a way that Pilate does not expect. He explains that his followers did not take up arms to defend him or prevent his arrest. They did not take up arms because Jesus' kingdom is not from this world. He did not come to occupy an earthly throne but to help people learn the truth about themselves. In that moment Pilate realizes that this would-be messiah is different. This one has an unusual sense of personal authority and eyes which can see right through a Roman governor. Pilate finds himself squirming in his chair. Suddenly the blood-soaked Galilean is not the one on trial. Pilate is on trial and struggling to justify himself to this so-called messiah. The accused has somehow become the judge.

Pilate is not the only one to suffer this kind of reversal. Two of the disciples had followed along to be spectators at Jesus' trial. One of them was Peter. Peter had hoped to stay at a safe distance from the trial going on inside. But as he warms himself before the fire in the courtyard Peter discovers that there is no safe place for him on this day. Someone recognizes him as a follower of Jesus. The questions start flying fast and furious. "You are not also one of his disciples are you (John 18:25)?" "Did I not see you in the garden with him (John 18:26)?" Suddenly Peter is on the spot. There is no time for a carefully crafted diplomatic answer. There is no way for Peter to dodge the question. His only options are to openly affirm his faith in Christ or to deny that faith. Like Pilate, Peter discovers that he is the one who is really on trial. And this trial is not going well.

For Peter and for Pilate the real trial revolves around their ineffective attempts to understand the nature of Jesus' kingship. In Jesus' kingdom it is God who reigns and not Caesar. In Jesus' kingdom it is grace and not the exercise of power which is the measure of all things. Jesus speaks to Pilate, Peter, and to us when he says, "My kingdom is not from this world... (John 18:36)."

The Scottish reformer John Knox came to understand the importance of this distinction during a very difficult time in his life. Knox became a central figure in the effort to reform the English church under Edward VI in 1549. He had even served as a chaplain to the young king. But when Edward died in 1553, his sister Mary I ascended to the throne and reinstated Catholicism in England. After hundreds of Protestants were burned at the stake she became known as "Bloody Mary." Knox had to flee for his life and went first to France and then to Geneva, Switzerland where he met John Calvin. Knox used his time in exile to learn from Calvin and to reflect on his work in England. He came to

realize that he and his colleagues had failed the test that confronted them in England. The failure could be seen in the strong support which was initially extended to the new Catholic Queen.

Knox became convinced that English reformers had placed too much emphasis on the wealth and political power of the church. They failed to appreciate the nature of Jesus' kingdom. Jesus had not come to bring a kingdom of wealth and power. He came to bring a kingdom of grace. Knox believed that he had failed in his role as a preacher of the gospel of grace because he had not confronted the English Protestant power brokers with this crucial truth. As exiles they were reaping what they had sown. They were experiencing God's judgment. Jesus' words to Pilate spoke to these exiles with ringing clarity, "My kingdom is not from this world... (John 18:36)."

The Book of Revelation was written to emphasize the meaning of Jesus' kingdom for people who lived under the threat of genocide. As Roman power began to erode and the economic prospects of its citizens slipped the Roman leaders needed scapegoats. By demonizing the early church they could deflect attention from their many failures. The early church was an easy target for the politicians of Rome. People knew very little about this minority community. The public relations machine of the Roman state was set in motion against the powerless Christians. Frustrated Roman citizens had in the Christian movement a convenient target for their anger. The future of the church was in serious jeopardy.

Revelation invites these persecuted people to envision the kingdom Jesus came to bring. The early church is encouraged to remember that their existence does not flow from wealth and political power. Their existence is rooted in the kingdom of grace. They experience that kingdom in the act of worship. They receive its power as they gather together to sing praises to the God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. "My kingdom is not from this world... (John 18:36)."

This understanding of Jesus' kingdom guided John Knox when he received a second chance to reform the church. Knox returned to his native Scotland in 1559 after six years in exile on the European continent. This time his energies were directed to forming worshiping communities. In these communities people read scripture, listened to the word of God being preached, celebrated the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and sang the Psalms.

Under Knox' leadership Scotland took a creative approach to its Catholic establishment. Cardinals and bishops were permitted to keep their wealth and many continued to be members of Parliament. No Catholic churches were closed. Catholic priests were invited to join the new reformed kirk, but if they chose to remain in the old church they could continue to receive their salaries as long as they lived. The largely empty Catholic churches continued to receive two-thirds of their pre-Reformation income. Only one-third was diverted to meet the needs of the new kirk. As a result the Scottish reformation was carried out with far less bloodshed than that of any other country in Europe. There were only twenty five Protestant deaths and just two Catholic ones.

John Knox' greatest contribution was to help the Scottish reformers to pass the most important test of their lives. If their reform had been about wealth and power it would never have endured. For them and for us the only thing that matters is learning to live in the kingdom of grace. "My kingdom is not from this world... (John 18:36)."

