

The Faithful Witness

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The Last Sunday in Ordinary Time
Celebrating the Reign of Christ
The Sunday Next before Thanksgiving Day
November 22, 2009

Daniel 7:9-14; Revelation 1:4-6; John 18:33-37

“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” -- Revelation 1:4-5

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, reflected in all three of our readings from Scripture. The scene from the book of Daniel is the last judgment, when the brutal beasts of the world's empires have finally destroyed themselves, and final authority is handed over to the one described “like a human being,” as verse thirteen says. That phrase is the source of Jesus' designation of himself as “the Human One,” which is why the church has always understood this passage from an Old Testament book to be depicting Jesus' return at the end of time. The one who showed us what being human really means is the one who will be left when everything else is gone.

The reading from Revelation, from which this morning's text is taken, speaks of Jesus Christ as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Most people find it laughable to call Jesus Christ the ruler of the kings of the earth; the rulers of the earth that we know rule pretty much as they please, as long as they have the weapons and money and power to do so. From the world's perspective, the church seems to be at its most delusional when it claims that Jesus Christ is the ruler of earth's rulers.

We see that perspective – the world's perspective – in the reading from John's gospel, when Jesus is asked by Pilate if he is the king of the Jews. Jesus replies that he is, but not as Pilate imagines. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, he says, for if it were – and here we come to the heart of the exchange and the heart of the Christian faith – if indeed Jesus' kingdom were of this world, his followers would be fighting.

Does that sound at all familiar? That Jesus' followers would be fighting? Jesus says that his followers don't fight; they don't fight to save him from crucifixion, and they don't fight to save themselves. They don't fight to save their loved ones, they don't fight to save their way of life. They don't fight to preserve democracy, they don't fight to combat radical Islam. Jesus says his followers don't fight. Violence is not an option for his followers. If it were, they would be fighting not for Jesus and his realm, but for their own interests and the realms of this world.

And so I ask again: does that sound familiar? Does that sound like anything we know, that Jesus' followers would be fighting? When the emperor Constantine handed Christianity the sword in the fourth century, we grasped it eagerly in our passionate desire to be accepted by a violent world on that world's violent terms, and the day is long past when we should have handed that sword back.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, when we focus our attention for a few moments on last things. On the things that matter most, on the things of ultimate significance, on the things that will be there when everything else is gone.

We Christians believe that Jesus the Christ will be there at the end. We believe that his way of life – his non-violent way of life – will be the last thing standing. When all of us who use violence to get our way – military violence, political violence, social violence, economic violence, domestic violence, environmental violence – when we will have destroyed ourselves with our violence, Jesus Christ's way of non-violence will remain.

Let me be brief and come to the point and relieve you of much talking on this last Sunday of the church year, when we focus our attention on the things that matter most.

Having been a Christian for my entire life, having studied Christianity for my entire life, and now having made a profession of Christianity for the rest of my life, I've come to the conclusion that the gospel of Jesus Christ comes down to this simple choice: we either embrace violence and the realms of this world, or we renounce violence in all its forms and give our allegiance to the Prince of Peace. Christianity as a way of life is no more complicated than that, it seems to me. As I've said to you before, Christianity is not complicated, it's just very, very hard.

And nothing is harder in this violent world of ours than to renounce violence and to refuse to cooperate with it, for we are told, time and time again, that violence saves us. A strong defense saves us. Our having weapons of mass destruction and our taking them from others saves us. Our pre-emptive strikes save us. Our economic domination of the world's economy saves us. Our imposing our way of life on others saves us. Destroying the competition saves us. And unless we do those things – unless we live as violently as the world lives – we will be lost.

No, the Christian faith says, we will not be lost, rather, we will be saved. We are saved, our faith says, when we take up our cross, every day and in every way, and follow the faithful witness, the one who showed us what truly living as human beings looks like. We are saved when we renounce the violence of this world, in all its forms, and take up the cross of non-violence and follow Jesus the Christ. Follow him on the path that leads to Calvary, the path that leads to resurrection, the path that leads to eternal life.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

That's the choice, my friends, on this last Sunday of the church year. It'll be the choice on the first Sunday of the new church year. It'll be the choice on every Sunday of every church year. It's the choice that matters most.