

INRI

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, November 22, 2009)

Well, here we are on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Today many churches will be encouraging folks to prepare to give thanks to God on this holiday that has been a part of our nation since the arrival of the pilgrims. Or if you read the pastor's column in the newsletter you might recall that some claim the first Thanksgiving was even before the arrival of the pilgrims, in 1565, in what is now St. Augustine, Florida. So why then do we begin the service with a hymn from the Resurrection section of the hymnal? And if you read the Scripture lessons you may have seen that the Gospel lesson is from the crucifixion narrative in the Gospel of John.

Let me assure you, I am not confused about the season. This is also "Christ the King Sunday" in our liturgical calendar, and these are in fact the lectionary lessons assigned for this Sunday. And, I might add, this is so typical of the church. We are not in synch with the world – when the world seeks revenge, we preach forgiveness. When the world cries for justice, we preach mercy. When the world divides the world into races, cultures, clans and classes, the church preaches that we are one family, all are God's children. And this Thursday when many in our country will sit down to a special feast and offer thanks, maybe thanks for the food, maybe thanks for our homes, or even our freedoms, it is only appropriate that the church should ask us to think more deeply about our thankfulness.

So let's turn to Scripture and the lessons for this Sunday to see what guidance we might receive. Let's start with King David – what do you think he would he give thanks for if he observed Thanksgiving? If you would look back over his life you might come up with a pretty good list: He started out as a shepherd, the youngest brother, the one who was often overlooked. You remember how Samuel came to his father's house to anoint a new king and his father didn't even bother to call him in from tending the sheep. He eventually went from there to the king's house, but King Saul didn't always treat him well. In fact, David often had to flee for his life. But God spared him – and I am sure David would give thanks to God for that. He eventually prevailed over Saul and became the king of Israel, and ushered in a whole new era of peace and prosperity, and I am sure David would give thanks to God for that. But then look what happened: There was that indiscretion with his neighbor's wife, Bathsheba. There was the arranged murder of his neighbor and the death of the illegitimate child. That was followed by insurrection within his army and even within his own family, resulting in the execution of his own son, Absalom. At one point David had to flee Jerusalem because the revolt against him had become so strong. And we read in the beginning of 1 Kings that he was a frail, old man, suffering from incurable cold. It is one thing for a person who is strong, healthy and powerful to give God thanks and praise, but listen to what David said when he was not strong and healthy, but frail and dying:

2 Samuel 23:1-5 (TEV) ¹David son of Jesse was the man whom God made great, whom the God of Jacob chose to be king, and who was the composer of beautiful songs for Israel. These are David's last words:

The spirit of the LORD speaks through me; his message is on my lips. The God of Israel has spoken; the protector of Israel said to me: "The king who rules with justice, who rules in obedience to God is like the sun shining on a cloudless dawn, the sun that makes the grass sparkle after rain." And that is how God will bless my descendants, because he has made an eternal covenant with me, an agreement that will not be broken, a promise that will not be changed. That is all I desire; that will be my victory, and God will surely bring it about. David sees his own decline, his own weakness, his failures, his mortality, but in contrast he looks forward and sees that God's faithfulness is still there, as strong, as bright, as victorious as ever. David may have been the greatest king that Israel ever had, but as he declined, he saw that God was an even greater king, one who would never decline. In contrast, we are finite creatures. We can only understand this world, the physical things we see, the people we know. The best of us may understand something about people in other cultures, and maybe even other lands, but our thinking is defined by the terms of this world, and quite often limited by this world and the things we have experienced.

This must have been the case with Pontius Pilate. He knew about political power. There is no way he could have become a Roman governor if he didn't play politics, wielding power over others to maintain control, and yielding power to those greater than himself to retain his power. In those days there were a lot of kings – little kings, big kings – but all of them were subservient to Caesar. They may not have been a threat to Pilate, because he knew how to handle kings. After all, he had some power of his own, given to him by Caesar. So when Jesus was brought to him, Pilate simply had to find out where Jesus stood: how much power did he have, what was the extent of his power, and probably whether Pilate could use that power in some way to enhance his own power. So what did he ask Jesus? John tells us,

John 18:33-37 (TEV) ³³Pilate went back into the palace and called Jesus. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked him. ³⁴Jesus answered, "Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "Do you think I am a Jew? It was your own people and the chief priests who handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus said, "My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here!" ³⁷So Pilate asked him, "Are you a king, then?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this one purpose, to speak about the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to me." ³⁸"And what is truth?" Pilate asked.

We might think that Pilate was somewhat of a pathetic figure. He was the one who allowed the crucifixion of Christ, but we see so much ambivalence in his position. He found no fault in Jesus. He tried to release Jesus. In our lesson today it even looks like he is trying to understand Jesus. But he cannot understand Jesus' claim that his kingdom is not of this world. He can't even understand truth, although from his question we might wonder what doubts and questions filled Pilate's mind. In the end, he capitulated to the powers he saw around him, rather than trying to understand the truth and power that stood before him in the person of Jesus Christ. But even then, he must have had second thoughts, posting that sign over Jesus' cross saying, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, or in Latin, Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum, or as the acronym often used by the church, INRI. David could see God's faithfulness, God's strength and eternal power, even as his own power faded. But Pilate could not see the power of God as it stood right in front of him, in the person of Jesus Christ.

How about you - what are the powers you see at work in your life? We might claim that we no longer have kings, or at least here in America, we shed the power of kings more than 233 years ago. But what are the powers that seem greatest in your life? Is it your health and strength, or do you feel it fading, like David's left him as he came to the end of his life? Is it your own influence and power over others, or is that fading, too? I hope and pray that you do not have infidelities and family insurrections such as David had. Or is it money, or a pension, or a comfortable home, or maybe even a favorite chair? I hate to remind you that every one of these is not permanent. Every one will fade and eventually pass away. But there is one who will not fade, and that one is the one we worship, who we also call King of kings.

John also had a vision from heaven. I can hardly imagine how you take a heavenly vision and put it into words. John tried, and people have been grappling with an understanding of his words for almost 2,000 years. Listen again to how John tries to introduce us to this vision as he wrote about it to the churches in his time:

Revelation 1:4-8 (TEV) ⁴From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace be yours from God, who is, who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits in front of his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first to be raised from death and who is also the ruler of the kings of the world. He loves us, and by his sacrificial death he has freed us from our sins ⁶and made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father. To Jesus Christ be the glory and power forever and ever! Amen.

⁷Look, he is coming on the clouds! Everyone will see him, including those who pierced him. All peoples on earth will mourn over him. So shall it be! ⁸"I am the first and the last," says the Lord God Almighty, who is, who was, and who is to come.

Some people just love that image of Jesus coming on the clouds. Maybe it will be that way, maybe not – that is just an image – use it in a way that seems helpful to you. But listen again to the words that John reports to us, words of God, saying, "I am the first and the last, the one who is, who was and who is to come." This is another image, one that speaks to us clearly. God is God of the past, present and future. Take notice there is no fading. Just as God was mighty and powerful in the creation of the world, so he shows us his power today, and so we can be assured his power will remain unyielding and undiminished throughout eternity. Or perhaps verse 5 speaks more clearly to us, where Jesus Christ is called, "The faithful witness, the first to be raised from death, and who is also the ruler of the kings of the world." Just as John the Baptist said he was just the one to point the way to the Son of God, so Jesus pointed the way to God; he was the witness, in the world, to God's power that is greater than the world. And he was the first to be raised from death. He was not the only one to be raised from death, but here is the incredible, powerful word for us: He is the first to be raised from death, and if we follow him in life, we shall all follow him in death, and into life everlasting. Because his power doesn't fade. He is greater than any and all the kings and powers of this world. This is why David could acknowledge that God is able to make an eternal covenant, an agreement that will not be broken, a promise that will not be changed. For this, David gave thanks. May we also give thanks, because he is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Alpha and Omega, the first and last, everlasting. Amen.