

11-22-09

My wife, Tish, and I are confirmed, dyed-in-the wool anglophiles. From the time we met we learned that we both loved everything we'd every heard about the United Kingdom and Ireland. We dreamed of traveling to Great Britain but, alas, I was terrified of the idea of flying. So we had to be content with thinking about it from across the pond, so to speak. I wonder how many of you woke up, like we did, at 4:30 a.m. on July 29,1981 to watch every minute of Prince Charles and Lady Diana's marriage in St. Paul's in London live while eating crumpets and drinking tea. Finally, though, I got over the fear of flying. It occurred to me one day that the pilot and co-pilot and flight crew on a plane **really** expect to land safely at the end of the flight and if they feel that way, I could, too. So in 1999 and 2000 and 2003 we flew over to England and Ireland. England was everything we dreamed it would be. We saw St. Paul's, Big Ben, Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, and Stonehenge, and went to church in Westminster Abbey.

And let me tell you, you get a really good seat when you show up at Westminster Abbey wearing a clerical collar.

One thing that makes England England is the monarchy. Now I wouldn't trade living right here in the U.S.A in our democracy for anything. But looking closely at a monarchy is really fascinating. A royal personage has something about him or her that an elected official just doesn't possess.

When we were at Westminster Abbey we got to see the coronation chair. All anointed British sovereigns since 1308 have been seated in this chair at the moment of their coronation, with the exception of Queen Mary I. Just think—for over 700 years that throne has been used when a person is crowned king or queen.

Let's face it, people are fascinated with the idea of kings and queens. We have our presidents, but they have the Royal Family.

And that brings us to the feast day we celebrate today—the Sunday of Christ the King. And like other Sundays

commemorating Jesus, the church, and your clergy, are vested today in white. This is one of those holidays that has its origin in the Roman Catholic church. It is the Franciscans, followers of St. Francis of Assisi, who convinced the Pope in 1925 to institute the observance of a Sunday celebrating the all-embracing authority of Christ that will lead humankind to seek the peace of Christ in the kingdom of God. We celebrate the ultimate kingship of Jesus in our lives. And we celebrate the fact that we are a people who, like Jesus, choose to live in God's kingdom and no other.

It's interesting, isn't it, to look at the gospel reading for today. When the ancient Hebrew people talked about a Messiah, they pictured a king. A king who would be mighty in battle. When your experience had been exile in Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, when you had suffered under the Romans, you wanted a king who could raise up a kingdom. And so we read today about Pilate asking Jesus, "are you the king of the Jews?" But Jesus didn't answer Pilate directly. He answered by asking Pilate a question. "Do you

ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate was quick to separate himself from this strange man. He replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Again Jesus didn’t answer Pilate directly. Instead he said, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Well, finally Pilate had something he could get a handle on. Jesus was referring to **his kingdom**, so by definition he must be a king. Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” And Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. **Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.**”

What do you suppose Jesus meant when he told Pilate, “my kingdom is not from this world?” I think Jesus was talking about choices. When his followers asked how they were to pray he taught them the beautiful and powerful Lord’s Prayer. Addressing God we say “thy kingdom come, thy

will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”. Okay, we want to be part of God’s kingdom here on earth but what does that really mean? How do we know we’re living in God’s kingdom?

Maybe the best answer to that question can be found in our Baptismal Covenant. Last Sunday at the 9:15 service, during the baptism of Stephanie Goodrich, we all stood and entered into the interactive dialog that is the Baptismal Covenant. After the part of the covenant that reflects our beliefs as stated in the Nicene Creed, we get to the questions:

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” We get to make choices here. We can come together as a faith community or not. And we all say together: “I will with God’s help.”

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, when ever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” More choices to make. And we all say together: “I will with God’s help.

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” We’re asked to make choices about what we say and do. We’re invited to choose to set an example. And we all say together: “I will, with God’s help.”

“Will you seek and serve Christ is **all** persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Think of the choices here. Think of Jesus when his own followers tried to keep sick women and little ragamuffin children away from this important leader of theirs and he says, “no, let them come to me. Anyone who cannot welcome them cannot welcome my kingdom.” And when we’re asked this question about choosing to seek Christ and choosing to serve Christ and choosing to love our neighbors as ourselves we all say together: “I will with God’s help.”

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” This one asks us to choose life and equality and fairness throughout the world—not just among those folks we recognize as

neighbors. And again, we can make our choice and we can all say together: “I will with God’s help.”

Now we’ve pictured Jesus’ kingdom as a place where we’re called to worship together, reconcile our wrongs, set a good example, love our neighbors and respect all folks’ dignity. Just how are we expected to live up to all of that? How can we ever think we can live in God’s kingdom? The answer is that we can never expect to do it alone. However, the answer becomes clearer when we think about the second part of the response we gave to each of these questions. We said “I will”, but we followed that with the phrase that makes it all possible. “I will, **with God’s help.**”

This is the last Sunday of the church year. Over this last year we’ve heard again, as we do every year, the story of Jesus’ nativity and baptism, of his teachings, of his suffering and crucifixion and rising again from the dead. We’re about to start the cycle over again as we get ready to enter into another Advent season. And now, today, we’re reminded that Christ is the King. He’s the king in a special

and unique kingdom. A kingdom not of this world. A kingdom each and every one of us is invited to live in if we can just try to keep the promises we've made in our baptismal covenant. They're big promises but we know we can keep them because what we've promised is that we'll do these things **with God's help**.

When I think about God's kingdom I'm reminded of the writings of Verna Dozier, a great African-American writer and lay person who died a few years ago. One of the first books I read in my discernment process leading to ordination was her book *The Dream of God*. Dozier said that male and female, God made us in God's own image. She points out that that doesn't mean we are good or perfect or programmed. The way we represent the image of God in this world is through our freedom. Unlike any of God's other creatures, we alone have been given the **choice** of whether to respond to God as God wants us to, or to go another way. As Dozier puts it, "the lover [in this case God] is always vulnerable to the beloved. The beloved may always say no."

Verna Dozier went on to say that the kingdom of God takes two forms, “the church gathered” and “the church scattered”. We gather, like we’ve done this morning, to break bread as a community, to hear our story retold, and to recommit ourselves to the dream of God. Then we scatter to live into that dream. Each of our ministries is to live into God’s dream of a good creation with Jesus as our model.

When he stood before Pilate Jesus didn’t look much like a king. He had been betrayed, beaten, scorned. He had been flogged, dressed in a purple robe and crowned with a crown of thorns. But when Pilate asked him if he was a king he gave an answer about a kingdom that Pilate couldn’t even image. He told of a kingdom that doesn’t belong to this world. Jesus came to serve and not to be served in a kingdom where he is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”. He reigns in a kingdom where each of us has a home if we only choose to model ourselves after Jesus and live in the dream that God has for each and every one of us.

May it ever be so. Amen.