

Jesus v. the Empire

[Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14](#)

[Psalms 93](#)

[Revelation 1:4b-8](#)

[John 18:33-37](#)

In the year 312, the Roman emperor had a dream.

The night before the battle of Milvian Bridge which is in northern Italy, according to the 4th century historian, Lactantius, the emperor Constantine

“was advised in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of his soldiers and then engage in battle. He did as he was commanded and by means of a letter X turned sideways, with the top of its head bent around, he marked Christ on their shields. Armed with this sign, the army took up its weapons.”

And won the battle. It turned the tide of Constantine’s battle to become Caesar Augustus of the whole Roman empire.

Perhaps it also turned the tide of Christianity. It marked the end of persecution in the Roman Empire – the following year a freedom of religion edict declared "that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best." Constantine became a patron of Christianity and built a new city, a “new Rome” named Constantinople after him which included Christian buildings and churches. He paid for it by taxing those who had not converted to Christianity!

But Constantine found that Christians had many different ideas and there were major disputes over theology. He called the first big church council to settle some of these disagreements and it was in that council that the Nicene Creed

originated. He wanted to use Christianity to unite his large and somewhat splintered empire.

So the outcome of that dream in 312 was that church and empire became inextricably combined. And stayed that way.

And stayed that way. So that today, Presidents can rally their followers by standing outside a church carrying a Bible. So that today, voting Republican and identifying as an evangelical Christian go hand in hand. And so that today the Catholic church can seek to excommunicate a President who supports public policy which goes against their beliefs.

But look at today's Gospel reading.

Jesus answered [Pilate], "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." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" 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."

Jesus is not about to be co-opted by empire. He is very clear. His kingdom is not from this world. His empire is not from here. Christ's reign is based in truth.

In a time of false news and fake facts, of postmodern denial of grand narratives, doesn't that sound refreshing? "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

But in the next verse Pilate asks, "What is truth?" No response is recorded, it's just a question left hanging, "What is truth?"

It's a question that has been on my mind since Friday and the acquittal of the young man who killed two men and wounded a third. I wasn't in that courtroom, I don't know what the jury heard or what they needed to hear to find him guilty of the charges against him. But I can see that there are two

stories here – one of men who seeing an active shooter tried to stop him and another of an immature young man with a gun who feared for his life. What is the truth? As we examine the facts as we know them, there are two competing truths.

But I think that the conversation between Jesus the Christ, and Pilate, the representative of the Emperor, is on a completely different level. Truth as Jesus means it is not the facts, nor the interpretation of the facts. Truth is much deeper.

And it is that Truth that we celebrate today, the last Sunday of the Church's year when we celebrate the Truth that Jesus came to testify to.

That God is love and that the kingdom of love, of nonviolence, of equality and peace is very real. We see the empire. Every day our minds are filled with images of violence and depravity but the Truth is quite different. The truth is that one day all that will fall away. One day the beloved community will arise and we will see plainly that the Christ is truly the Ruler of the world.

This was the hope of the slaves on the plantations, it has been the hope of oppressed people everywhere, that there is a better life coming. Yet the Truth that Jesus testified to is not "Hang on, things are going to get better". We never hear Jesus say that. The Truth is that God's love and forgiveness are available here and now and as we live our lives based on that truth so we are building the reign of God right here, right now.

It's what we pray for, isn't it? Every Sunday and maybe more often, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And if we really mean those words then we get to build that kingdom. We get to live our lives based on the Truth. The truth that we are called, using the language of the second reading today, we are called by "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth... who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood... to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father."

We are called by none other than Christ who came to testify to the truth and who by his willingness to go nonviolently to his own torturous death showed us that the Empire does not win, that really when seen in the eyes of God, the emperor has no clothes – we are called by that Christ to be the reign of God, to be a holy people, a tribe of priests, set aside for the praising and glorifying of God.

We are called to live a life based in Truth and that Truth is the basic fundamental Truth that we are all dependent upon a loving God and that as we consciously live our lives drawing from God's love and being channels for God's love, God's peace, God's healing then we are participating in the reign of God and refusing to be caught up in the machinations of Empire.

In fact, we are subversive. We work in overt and covert ways to build the beloved community. We engage as educated and concerned citizens to use our political process to build peace and justice. We stand up to oppose bullying and oppression. And at the same time we are busy quietly building the opposite of empire, the reign of God where we are priests, constantly offering prayer and thanksgiving to the Triune God of the universe.

I imagine it's a bit like scaffolding. All the ways that we participate in making this world a better place, through prayer, through working for social justice, through the Abundance Shop, Laundry Love, Community Dinners and 40Prado, through giving and forgiving, look like we're building something but actually its just the scaffolding. And when the scaffolding and the plastic sheeting all comes down we will see that all the time we have been building the reign of God, based on the Truth which is love.

Let us pray together the prayer attributed to St Francis:

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace
Where there is hatred let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness joy.
Grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand.
To be loved. as to love
For it's in giving that we receive
It's in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.