

Political

Rev. William Stell

April 15, 2018

John 18:33-38 — Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate 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?” Jesus answered, “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. 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.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

There are many Christians who say that the church shouldn't be political, that our faith isn't political. And that sure sounds nice, because it allows us to avoid tension, to cast out potential conflict. I mean, honestly, who wants to have a good conversation at fellowship ruined by someone bringing up something controversial—or who wants to have a good sermon ruined by the pastor bringing up something divisive?

But unfortunately, Jesus did not share our avoidance of controversy. The fact is that most of Jesus's teachings and actions in Scripture *were* divisive—along religious lines, cultural lines, and political lines. What's more, Jesus seemed to be perfectly fine with this. Again and again, he told his followers to *expect* people to get upset about the things they were doing and the messages they were preaching. That doesn't mean that controversy is a *good* thing or that Christians should aim for it, but it does mean that when we hear things like, “Oh, the church shouldn't talk about that, shouldn't get involved with that, because that's controversial”—well, that isn't a very persuasive reason, in and of itself, for followers of Jesus. Sometimes, we are called to do things and say things that some people will find controversial. For followers of Jesus, that is simply a given.

Now, granted, the statement that Christianity isn't political or shouldn't be political is definitely true in the sense of political partisanship. God is not calling all Christians to be Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, or members of any other party. Jesus did not affiliate himself with any of the established political groups in his society, and we don't need to either, because the will of God can never be equated with the will of any human-made, power-seeking political camp—even those that claim to be fighting for “Christian” values. That said, just because our faith isn't partisan doesn't mean that it isn't political.

Let's take a closer look at our second reading this morning: Jesus is on trial, having a private dialogue with one of the most powerful politicians in the region. Pilate asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” In other words, “Do you think of yourself as the king of your people?” There

is no *real* king for the Jews anymore, mind you, there is only a Roman emperor and those who report to him. Jesus keeps re-directing and short-circuiting Pilate's questions; it gives me the impression that Jesus has very little respect for Pilate as a leader, just like Jesus had very little respect for many of the religious leaders around him. Although he doesn't claim to be the king of the Jews here in this passage, Jesus does speak, repeatedly, about his kingdom—which is a political term, of course: kingdom.

And actually, it's important to know that political terminology appears throughout the Gospels and throughout Scripture—although it's often lost on us, because the terms don't have the same political connotations in modern American culture. Take, for example, our first reading: in Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul writes, "But our citizenship is in Heaven." Now, in Paul's day, the word "citizenship" meant *Roman* citizenship, and it was one of the most important identity markers in that region of the world: you were either a citizen of the Empire or you weren't—and *not* being a citizen had very real social and political consequences. Here in Philippians, Paul appropriates this political term and says that, although he is in fact a Roman citizen, *his* citizenship, *our* citizenship, isn't really in Rome, or in any other state; it's in Heaven. Another example of political terminology appears just a few words later: Paul writes, "and from Heaven, we await a savior." Many Christians today think of the word "savior" as a purely religious, other-worldly term: a savior gives our souls salvation after we die—that's what a savior is, many think. Quite the contrary in Paul's day, however: as we heard on Palm Sunday, when the Jewish people in Paul's day (and for centuries beforehand) said that they were awaiting a savior, they meant that they were awaiting someone who would bring *political* salvation to their lives on Earth, here and now. "Savior" was a political term.

And even two of the terms that Christian tradition has made most central to belief in Jesus—"Lord" and "Son of God"—even these terms had a political connotation in the time of Jesus and Paul. Not too long before Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus, the famous Roman emperor, began referring to himself as the son of God, which became a common title for the emperor. And for many years after Caesar Augustus's reign, when the Christian movement was in its early stages, all Roman citizens were required to take an oath to the empire, and while making this oath, they were required to say, "Caesar is Lord"—which is just like saying, "Caesar is my master, the highest authority in my life." The earliest Christians refused to take this oath, even in the face of immense persecution, for they proclaimed that *their* Lord, *their* son of God, was not Caesar, but Christ. So, these two major terms in the Christian tradition originated not from abstract theological thinking, but from concrete political resistance. Our faith, friends, has been politically controversial from the very beginning.

Let's go back, once more, to the private meeting between Jesus and Pilate: notice that although Jesus claims to have a kingdom, and thus claims to be a political ruler of sorts, he says that his kingdom "is not from here." This makes perfect sense if you read the rest of the Gospels: Jesus is always talking about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven—in fact, it's the subject he speaks most often about in Scripture. So, we can call Jesus a political ruler, we can even call

Christianity a political movement, but we need to note that the ruler and the movement alike are not from this world.

But might this suggest that Christianity *shouldn't* be political, by most people's understanding of the word? Sure, Scripture uses all of this political terminology, but it's using it to talk about the Kingdom of God. Doesn't that separate the two kingdoms? Can't we be citizens in one and also citizens in the other and not worry about them intersecting or influencing each other? Doesn't Jesus's talk about the Kingdom of God divide the realm of faith and the realm of politics for us? Perhaps it would—except for one little thing, which is actually one big thing: while Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not *from* here, that doesn't mean that his kingdom is not *coming* here.

In fact, that is one of Jesus's most frequent and most urgent messages: “the Kingdom of God is at hand” and “the Kingdom of God is among you.” And of course, in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, which we say together every week, we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on Earth as it is in Heaven.*” It is in this sense, friends, that our faith is and must be political: we are called, here and now, to work towards the reign of God, marked by justice and peace, compassion and hospitality, forgiveness and gratitude, and so much more. And because, as Paul writes, we are now citizens under that divine reign, we are called to orient every aspect of our lives—including our political opinions and actions—around our allegiance to the God who is Love, the God who we have come to know in the person of Jesus and in the words of Scripture.

In closing, I'll just say that no one person can dictate what exactly this allegiance should look like, how exactly our citizenship under God's reign should play out in any given situation. Each of us is free to discern, for ourselves, what political speech and what political action God is calling us to. To share just one example for myself, I believe that our Christian citizenship compels us to be compassionate and hospitable towards immigrants who are vulnerable. In addition to the dozens of verses commanding precisely this in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus claims that allegiance to him requires allegiance to the least of these. So, whenever the least of these are targeted and vilified by modern-day Rome, I believe that followers of Jesus are called to choose compassion and hospitality over the state and its agenda.

Of course, you can discern differently. You can believe that God is calling you to work towards God's reign in different ways. But regardless, God *is* calling you, calling all of us, to work towards it. God is calling us, the church, to be political. May the Spirit of God be our guide. Amen.