

OUT OF THIS WORLD
Sermon for Pentecost Last B (Christ the King)—Jn 18:33-37
LPC, 11/22/15

I did some research on the expression “out of this world.” Evidently the expression first appeared in print in the early 1900’s. “Out of this world” is defined as “wonderful, exciting, extraordinary, superb.” It seems to be closely related to “far out,” an expression similarly defined, which I remember from my hippie days in the 1960’s. Reportedly we can attribute the expression “far out” from jazz slang of the mid-1900’s, referring to extemporaneous music that is “daringly inventive.” I am indebted to the “Idioms” tab of thefreedictionary.com for this information.

I did this research inspired by today’s Gospel reading from John about Christ before Pilate, where Jesus says his kingdom is “not of this world.” We hear this story in a more complete form during Holy Week, in its context within the Passion narrative. Jesus has been arrested for blasphemy, and referred by the Jewish authorities to the Roman governor, who has the unique authority to have Jesus executed.

Here is an interesting historical detail. Blasphemy is a capital offense according to Jewish law, but under Roman rule, the Jews do not have the authority to execute people, so Jesus’ Jewish enemies turn him over to Roman authority. However, under Roman law, blasphemy is not punishable by death, so Jesus’ enemies have to come up with a Roman charge for which Jesus can be executed.

This is an interesting legal problem which may or may not intrigue some of you lawyers in the congregation. What Jesus’ enemies are really challenged by is Jesus’ claims to be the Son of God, but this is not that big a deal to the Romans, who have the exclusive right to mete out the punishment Jewish law demands. So Jesus’ enemies do what lawyers sometimes do and look for a way the prevailing law may be made to apply.

They do this by interpreting Jesus’ theological claims as political claims. In fact, Jesus has never, so far as I can see, claimed to be a king. What he has done is to refer to himself with language that in Hebrew scripture is associated with the kingdom of God. And it is on this tenuous connection that the case against Jesus is brought to Roman judgment. Jesus, it is charged, has implicitly, if not explicitly, claimed to be a king, which would make him a rival to the Roman emperor. This would make him subject to the Roman law under the capital charges of treason and sedition. A pretty neat bit of legal wrangling, wouldn’t you say?

Even as we call Jesus “king” as we do this “Christ the King” Sunday, we must remember this. We must remember that the title of “king” is one that was wrangled by Jesus’ enemies to make him subject to the transient rules of earthly power. When we call Jesus “king” we must do so aware of the irony this term has when applied to Jesus.

Jesus is not a king in the manner of king as we typically think of them. His kingship is not oppressive, coercive, reactionary, punitive, self-protective, retributive, militant, or in any way defensive. Jesus is not even a king in the manner of benign kings. He does not retaliate when

attacked, even to protect his own people. Jesus' power is not earthly power. His power is the out-of-this-world power of love. That places it in a sometimes precarious position vis-à-vis the blunt and blustering powers and kingdoms of this world, no matter how benign they may be.

If you wonder how this fragile, out-of-the-world power of love stands up against the earthly powers of evil and hatred, check out a couple of videos on the internet. One is an open letter of a man to the Paris terrorists who murdered his wife. He speaks of his baby son, who will grow up free and happy in defiance of the terrorists' desire to foster fear and hatred.

Another video related to the Paris attacks is of a reporter talking to a little boy of about three and the boy's father. The little boy expresses fear of the mean people with guns. The father gently reassures him and tells him, but we have flowers. Look at all the flowers people have brought. The boy wavers and asks if the flowers can protect them from guns. The father says, yes, they can, and the child is reassured.

Now, we know that flowers are not literally going to protect us from guns in this world. But the power of love does prevail in the out-of-this-world kingdom that Jesus represents. It is scary and vulnerable to rely on that power in this world. But like it or not, that is the power of Jesus' kingdom, which, believe me, will prevail against the mean men with guns.

Because that may be a politically touchy note on which to end, I will add a reference to another internet video, not related to the Paris attacks. In this one an older man is shown sharing his life with a loyal and loving dog. The man clearly has a heart attack and is rushed to the emergency room. The dog follows the ambulance, but of course, is kept from entering the hospital. Outside the hospital, the dog waits. It rains, the dog waits. Time passes and we viewers become aware that the man has probably died. Then the hospital doors open and out comes a young woman in a wheelchair. The dog jumps up and runs to her. She grins and pets him.

Then comes the surprise ending. The video reveals itself as a public service ad promoting organ donation. The man's love has survived him. Love is stronger than death.

Love that survives violence and death: this is the power of Jesus. This is the power that is out of this world. It is a brave and vulnerable thing to stand up for this out-of-this-world power in the blunt, blustering and cruel world in which we live. But it is the way of Jesus.

Today we baptize another baby, praise be to God. We will pledge to do everything in our power to support James John Neville in the way of Jesus. This means we must teach him where real power lies, not in the powers of this world which seem so monolithic and frightening, but in the out-of-this-world power of love. This power, this kingdom, is truly wonderful, exciting, extraordinary, superb, and daringly inventive.