

Of Kings And Dictators

Sometimes we preachers preach with the New York Times in one hand and the Bible in the other.

Other times, like today, we don't need the newspaper.

That's because on days like today, the scripture reading is nearly identical to the day's headline!

What with the Jewish people demanding from God a king!

Sound familiar?

It sure does to about a third of our country these days, don't you think?

How else to account for 33% of our fellow citizens insisting that their man was cheated out of the last election?

Even when every member of his own team who had anything to do with election security says — it's a big fat lie?

How else to account for a former army general endorsing the idea of a military coup here, in order to reinstall the former president?

How else to account for the virus of QAnon spreading throughout, you guessed it, our churches?!

In case you haven't heard, QAnon is a conspiracy theory that insists (without a shred of evidence) that an elite group of rich people rule the world, all while performing horrible acts of pedophilia and sex trafficking.

From the basement of a Washington DC Pizzeria.

Which, it turns out, doesn't have a basement!

So it's ironic that today's first reading has our ancestors in faith clamoring for the same thing far too many of our fellow citizens (and fellow faith-believers) are clamoring for today:

We want a king!

And God says to them, as probably he's saying to us:

You gotta be kidding!

Don't you know kings will steal not only your lands and crops but your daughters and sons?

Don't you know kings couldn't care less about you?

And will prove it by taxing the poor and gorging themselves with regular golf outings and fancy travel to exotic places, on your dime?

Don't you know that kings stay in power by setting people against each other?

That they lie habitually?

And shamelessly accuse others of the very scandals they themselves have perfected?

Yet our ancestors in faith say what too many of our contemporaries are saying today:

We don't care!

We want our king!

Who cares if "his speeches are full of ad hominem attacks intent upon slandering his critics and opponents?

("Ad hominem" means – stuff he's making up).

Who cares if he spouts nonsense, pretending to care?

Like, the virus will just disappear?

And, maybe we can inject bleach as a COVID cure!

Who cares that he erases distinctions between fact and fiction?

Encourages cultural, racial and ethnic tensions?

So what that he engages in daily challenges to the rule of law?"
Geo. C. Edwards III, Professor, Texas A&M, modified.

We want our king!

And our ancestors in faith?

They got him!

And for hundreds of years, the Jewish people suffered under their kings.

Until a new king appears from the religiously questionable north country of Galilee.

Seeking to call the people back to what a life lived in harmony with the Creator looks like.

And no surprise here.

While he's met with open arms by the down and out, it's venom and hatred from everyone else.

Even his own family tries to have him committed.

Today's gospel lesson starts in mid-sentence: "and the crowd came together again so they could not even eat."

And then the controversy begins.

"Who is this nobody from Nowheresville?"

And who does he think he is?

Healing all this rabble that no self-respecting person would be caught dead with?"

His own family is on the hunt for him.

Planning a first class intervention for this son, this brother of theirs, who is obviously off his rocker.

Mark, in his gospel lesson today, brings us nose to nose with the conundrum of choosing a leader dedicated to power — or choosing a leader dedicated to service.

On the one hand, we have the Blessed Virgin Mary, together with Jesus' immediate family, standing shoulder to shoulder with the educated scribes and men of letters.

All of them dedicated to upholding the social fabric.

All of them well acquainted with the word of God.

All pillars of society to whom we should rightly listen.

On the other hand, there is Jesus.

Surrounded by the mentally and physically ill.

Those who are outcast because they are not clean.

The unlettered.

Frankly, a motley crew who wouldn't know the word of God if it bit them on the nose.

But they do know this: they need.

They need compassion.

They need understanding.

They need the healing grace of God.

So what do the good folks do?

The good immediate family of Jesus says he's lost his mind.

And the good religious leaders, folks like me and Fr. Mafi, we say: "he's possessed by evil itself."

And Jesus responds by talking to us all about power.

He's here to bind up the strong man of the status quo.

To ditch that love affair we have with our rotten kings!

Not to mention, he's here to loot the house of what we say is good;
what we say is evil.

Jesus talks about power because it's our love of power, that sense
of entitlement to control people, places and things, that gets us into
this mess in the first place.

And over the years, we've built on that power.

Creating the powers of racism and sexism.

Declaring some races good and others evil.

By institutionalizing a second-class status for women.

By creating the power of money and consumerism.

By insisting on rigid, narrow gender identities — even though God
does not.

By worshipping the power of military might, since everyone knows
that "might makes right!"

This kind of power is motivated by fear.

Fear of the other.

Fear of not having all I want.

Fear of being subjected to the authority of someone I consider to be inferior.

Isn't that what wanting a king is all about?

A king doesn't fix our fears.

He fixates on them!

No wonder the Bible's mantra is: "Don't be afraid."

In the seeming strangeness of God's love for the unlovable, of God's unbridled willingness to ensure that rules are meant to serve us, and not we the rules, Jesus gives to us a new kind of power.

One that defeats fear.

One that, seen through our untransformed eyes, looks crazy.

Perhaps even demonic.

What is this new power that Jesus gives to all who are willing to accept it?

What eliminates fear?

It's love yes — but love, crucified.

It's the power of sacrificial love.

A love that turns the other cheek.

That gives coat and shirt when only the coat is demanded.

That walks the extra mile.

That loves the enemy and has mercy on the broken.

It's the love that dies rather than kills.

Such is the unexpected power of this God who comes to us in gentle nudges and quiet whispers.

A God who, when we find ourselves on the cross -- comes and hangs with us.

Which gets us back to where we started: our love affair with a king.

Fear makes us rigid.

Fear makes us certain we are right.

But God offers to strip away the many layers of certainty with which we are clothed.

Certainty in deciding who is in and who is out.

Certainty in deciding who is right and what is wrong.

Certainty in deciding who should rule and who should submit.

Jesus says to us today:

Lose that certainty!

Let it go!

Learn how to listen to the gentle God who loves the undeserving.

Who embraces the ugliness, not only in them over there, but the ugliness in you and me too.

This God who lets us demand a king, even as he begs us not to.

We are living in difficult days.

Days in which high-minded reasons are given to support heinous policies of bigotry and prejudice.

Can we as a people — remember who we are?

Can we remember — who we are called to become?

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