

THE POWER OF GENTLENESS

Reign of Christ, 2012 – Cycle B: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; John 18:33-37

There was a time when teachers in the Canadian Association of Pastoral Education struck fear in the hearts of their students. I can remember giving a ride to a fellow seminarian in my junior year at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. He had just finished his three-month training at Interfaith Pastoral Counselling Centre in Kitchener, and for him it had turned into a test of survival. Everything he said and did was challenged either by his supervisor or by his fellow students in the Clinical Pastoral Education group – usually a group of about seven seminarians or seminarians and social workers. As he described it, it was a process of tearing down a person and then rebuilding his or her life from its core. The tearing down, he told me, was brutal; the rebuilding, certainly not finished for him by the end of the three months. He warned me that the experience had been far from positive, and had left him questioning seriously his call to and aptitude for pastoral ministry.

His story was repeated by several others I came to know in that first year. You can imagine my surprise when Ken Beal, my Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor at Grand River Hospital said to us at our first meeting, a year later, “You have probably heard a lot of stories about CPE; about how many students are virtually destroyed by the experience. I want you to know that our group is not going to be like that. There is enough violence in the world without adding to it. You will encounter on the wards and in the Emergency Department the violence of surgery, injury, and death. You don’t need to be torn apart by me or by one another. This will be a gentle process: we will be gentle with each other. You will be changed by our time together and you will learn all kinds of things; but no one is going to be hurt here. I’ll be gentle with you.”

Ken was good to his word. He never lost his composure; he never attacked anyone in the group. It became a time of self-discovery which was, at times, quite difficult. But his gentleness with us and our gentleness with each other buffered the suffering, loss, frustration, disappointment, trauma, and death we encountered with patients and families during our daily shift; it buffered the anger and frustration we often felt as we learned more and more about each other in telling our life story. Those three months with Ken, our chaplaincy group, and the hundreds of patients I saw shaped my approach to pastoral care and inspired my remaining as a volunteer on-call chaplain at Grand River Hospital to this day. But the greatest lesson I learned that summer was the power of gentleness. Few would characterize gentleness as powerful: if anything, the phrase appears to be self-contradictory; an oxymoron. But it does have power – power to heal and disarm and transform us and others. It is precisely what Jesus taught and modelled. We share a huge wink when we use the phrase “Christ the King,” because his reign does not resemble any of our earthly kingdoms or republics. Among other things, Jesus’ rule is gentle.

In today’s First Reading, we have what are purported to be King David’s last words – a life review, if you will. For the Hebrew people, David was a good and strong king: he brought order and stability to Israel and established the people as a nation. In his life review, he remembers “ruling over people justly, ruling in the fear of God; he compares himself to the sun rising on a cloudless morning.” But as we read on, we learn that he also took no prisoners when he encountered those he describes as “the godless,” presumably any who opposed his nation-building. He describes their fate at his hand figuratively, speaking of “touching them using an iron bar or the shaft of a spear.” Such a “touch” unquestionably brought about their death. David was not a gentle king; he was a warrior.

Pilate, in today’s Gospel, would probably describe himself as just, although we learn later in John’s account that political expediency trumps any moral courage he might have claimed. From the amount of time he spends questioning Jesus, though, we can assume that he takes seriously his role in government. At the same time, his failure to understand Jesus’ kingdom reveals that like David, Pilate is not gentle. As Rome’s representative in this far-flung province, he is completely comfortable using his power to conquer its peoples. And, of course, it is on Pilate’s watch that Jesus is eventually executed.

But he and Jesus talk past each other on the subject of kings and kingdoms. Pilate is trying to establish Jesus as an enemy of the state. What Jesus describes as his kingdom for Pilate does not resemble any earthly realm: Jesus does not use force. In fact, he says, “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” Rather, Jesus speaks of his mission to testify to the truth. And even before Pilate utters his haunting question, “What is truth?” we realize that

the two men are worlds apart. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus is not a king, or even an insurrectionist. Pilate does not understand him.

What is critical for John's readers and, of course, for all who follow Jesus in discipleship is that we do understand; that we make the distinction between the way of the world and the way of God and, at the very least, keep the two in open and ongoing dialogue. At times, Jesus' way of gentleness seems hopelessly idealistic; at other times, we get it, especially when we see violence begetting violence, those who are oppressed becoming oppressors when given a chance. Greed and entitlement are take-no-prisoners values that are destroying the world economy and the world's ecology. And power in all its many forms is seductive and destructive: we see the evidence everywhere we look. By the same token, the world knows little of gentleness and its potential for good. Pilate, not Jesus, sets the tone in so many precincts of life.

So often, in taking the gentle approach with people, in asking questions rather than giving advice, I feel the fool. Human nature invites the use of power over others, not its rejection. But healing and growth and potential need the fertile ground gentleness prepares. If people are to feel safe, they must feel as if they are being heard and that their opinion counts for something. Gentleness requires trust and faith that God is present, in, with, and under our relationships with one another to raise up the fallen, recover the lost, and heal what is injured. God works through gentleness, and calls the children of God to a gentleness born of wisdom and love and understanding and respect. "God so loved the world that he gave his Son, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). Continuing the work of discovering the power of gentleness, begun in Jesus and revealed in his life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection, is our call.

It was in 1925 that Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King. In the encyclical introducing this addition to the church calendar, he wrote, "Christ must reign in our minds...He must reign in our wills...He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things...He must reign in our bodies...which should serve as instruments of justice unto God."

Jesus calls us to acquaint ourselves with his power of gentleness.