

Diocese of Central New York Convention
Sunday, November 22, 2009

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop
The Episcopal Church

I met our new President the day after he was inaugurated. There was a big prayer service at the National Cathedral, with a whole raft of religious leaders. Before the service, each of us had about 20 seconds for a picture with the Obamas and the Bidens. When President Obama saw my staff (the stick or primatial cross I carry), he said to one of his staff, "I need one of those!" He has plenty of signs and symbols of office, but I think all leaders yearn for something that will make the work of leadership easier or more straightforward.

Pilate has plenty of signs of authority, and not just symbols of power, but physical evidence of it. The stories about him tell of his cruelty and unpredictability and inclination to violence. He doesn't just use signs to keep order, he uses every element of power he can put his hands on. He uses both signs and sticks. His guard carried ensigns and banners representing the power of Rome right into the center of Jerusalem, provoking offense and deep resentment in the Jewish populace. Pilate's very name is probably a reference to his skill with a spear. His job is to collect taxes and keep order, which he does with brute force. He knows that Passover has historically been a time of unrest and rebellion, so he's in Jerusalem to make sure there isn't an uprising. He's worried, and with good reason.

The guards bring Jesus in, bruised from his most recent interrogation, and Pilate begins his scornful questioning, "Are *you* the king?" Can you hear Pilate's worry, and also his disbelief? "Are you, you pitiful creature, trying to usurp my authority here?" What is Pilate going to do with this pathetic upstart?

"They say you're king of the Jews. *Are you a king?*"

And Jesus makes his remarkable riposte: 'You say so. I am here to address truth.' Jesus evidently doesn't see truth sitting right there, talking to him, so why should he continue this conversation? "You say that I am a king... If you had anything to do with truth, you would listen to me."

Pilate can only understand the kind of king he aspires to be, and he can't conceive of anything kingly about the prisoner in front of him. Who is free here? Who is king? Who has truth?

We celebrate this feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday of the Christian year, as a reminder of the end of all things, or perhaps in language that makes more sense, as the end or goal of creation. We've had this feast in the western church since fascism

began to raise its head in Europe between the World Wars. It also reminds us that our ultimate allegiance is supposed to be to a very different kind of power and authority.

What kind of king is Jesus claiming to be? He tells Pilate that he hasn't become a king through the world's doing, and that he's not one who either fights himself or encourages others to violence. His is not a kingdom of force. It is one of vulnerability, without arms or family or political power or even a place for the king to lay his head. Nor is this kingdom interested in defense; instead it comes with an invitation to embrace those who want to do us violence, and a command to love our enemies as well as those who love us.

The signs of this kingdom are humble – water and oil, bread and wine – the stuff of everyday life. And the symbols of power in this kingdom are the very sticks that Pilate uses for violence – the tree of death become the tree of life, and the royal throne of the cross.

You and I are citizens of this upside down kingdom, the ministers of a lord who as Revelation puts it, “made us to be a kingdom.” We have been created and baptized to be implementers of this love of enemy, to be servants of the least of these, to be dreamers of the undefended vision of the Reign of God.

Where is this kingdom, or maybe a better question, when is this kingdom? Jesus frequently reminds his hearers that it is around us, and among us, and within us. It is here and now, and it is urgent. It's not just pie in the sky when you die, as Joe Hill sang – and he knew something about the violence of the kingdoms of this world. One of those earthly kingdoms took his life too. No, Jesus insisted this kingdom was here, and he thought it was important to feed and heal people in this life, even if some of his followers have always wanted to push the feast off for a few years – or millennia.

King Jesus reigns wherever his kingdom-makers are at work. I am told that there is a certain priest in this diocese who used to work as a probation officer, and refused to carry a weapon. After she left that work, her former colleagues began to imitate her unwillingness to pack a pistol. How is it possible to meet Jesus in your neighbor if you walk around ready to shoot him or her?

I got to see the kingdom at the L'Arche Croyden home on Friday. The shared lives of those who are disabled and those who are not bring joy to any who meet them. The assistants who live or work in the four L'Arche homes in Syracuse come from around the world as well as right here. Each one is on a journey in search of that kingdom, and discovering it in the shared pain and joy and challenge of daily life.

I see the kingdom at work in the community who gather around Kathryn Jensen and the people of Grace, Utica, sharing pain and grief and fond memories of Jim, and refusing to let death have the final word. Even the editor of the local newspaper in Utica, Mike Kilian, had the vulnerability to write about his grief and stand in solidarity with others.

I met the kingdom yesterday among dozens of passionate young people who told me they want to leave this world better than they have found it.

Look a bit farther abroad and see king Jesus at work in the Mission of Miracles, El Salvador, transforming the lives of those with no other access to health care.

Where is king Jesus in the midst of the health care debates here? He is certainly speaking when we hear that all people need access to healing. There are lots of other voices in those debates that talk about self-protection and fear: we don't want to lose our coverage, we don't want to do anything to endanger what we already have. Most of those voices haven't yet recognized that if we don't share the resources we have we're all going to be a lot worse off. Jesus healed more often than he did anything else, he went out of his way to heal, and he rarely counted the cost. He healed lepers who didn't bother to say thank you, he healed people who merely got close enough to touch him, he healed a man whose friends worked hard to get their buddy in through the roof. The kingdom is evident whenever anyone is healed. I certainly don't want to miss it.

The signs of the kingdom are open doors, and access to Jesus and his ministry of good news, healing and feeding. The signs of the kingdom are not more and higher fences to inhibit access. Jesus doesn't use sticks to keep people out or drive them away. His sticks are the sacrificial, cross-shaped work of solidarity and accompaniment.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matt 25:34-36)

The only signs of office we need are the sticks of the cross. That is truth, right in front of us. Where and when will you help to build this kingdom?