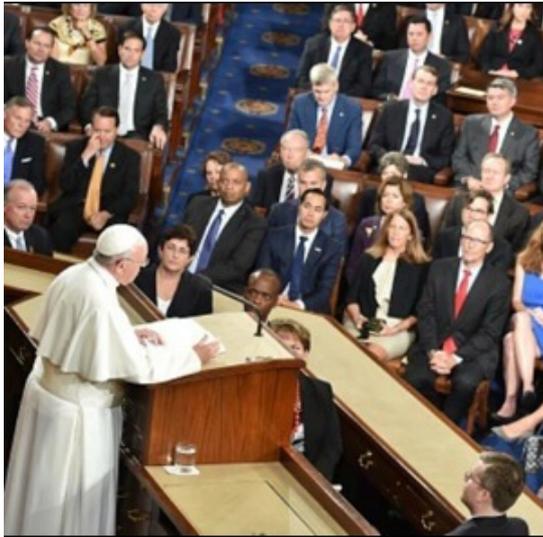


Citizens of Another Kingdom

John 18:33-37

On September 24 this year, Pope Francis addressed a joint sitting of the US Congress. He was the first pope ever to do so, and there was a sense of great expectation about what he might say. Would he speak as bluntly as he did media interviews or in homilies? Or would he defer to the power and authority of the Congress? What would happen when the church encountered power?

I think we can say that Pope Francis did not disappoint. He called the Congress to reflect on their God-give task, a task given to all



parliaments: Like Moses, God's great law-giver and prophet, they are to "keep alive a sense of unity by means of just legislation" as well as "to protect, by means of the law, the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face."

In today's fearful climate caused by terrorism, he acknowledged that "no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism," even Christianity; yet our response must be to unite, rather than turn the world into two camps, "that in the attempt to be freed of the enemy without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within."

And "when a stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must resolve now to live nobly and as justly as possible, as we educate new generations not to turn our back on "our neighbours ... Let us remember the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' ... The Golden Rule reminds us of our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development."

And just when everyone expected him to talk about abortion, he spoke instead about the abolition of the death penalty. He also called Congress to account about the global arms trade: "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as well all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood." Finally, he spoke of the need to "raise people out of extreme poverty" and to "avert the most serious effects of the environmental deterioration caused by human activity."

Political commentators observed that no-one emerged unscathed. The political right were criticised for their focus

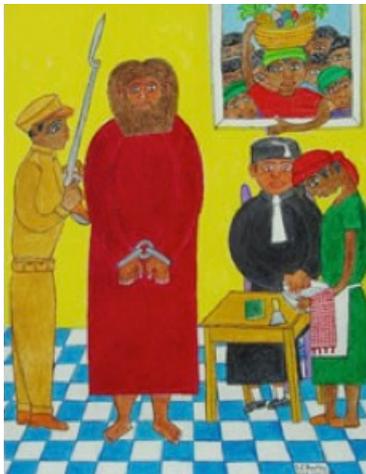


on wealth to the detriment of the poor, their lack of concern about the environment, their silence on the arms trade and their hawkishness about war. The left were criticised for their lopsided view of justice that didn't extend to the unborn, their disdain for the family and the institution of marriage, and the way they want to shut religion out of the public square. He was nothing if not an equal opportunity agitator. This was speaking truth to power.

I wonder if, as Pope Francis prepared for this event, he reflected on the way that political power has been a constant seduction for the church. Look at how, down through the ages, the church has been hand in glove with the state, beginning with Constantine, through many regimes and empires. Politics became an art practised by the church as well as the state. It didn't always end well. The church became good at exercising power over people, rather than using its authority for the sake of love. Did Pope Francis perhaps reflect on the encounter between Jesus and Pilate, the collision of two worlds, two kingdoms?



We know the back story. The Jewish leaders and religious officials have been looking for a way to silence Jesus. Political authority and religious authority are indistinguishable in their world. They make their move in the dark garden. Judas is their man, and with his kiss Jesus' fate is sealed. The end game is Jesus' execution, but the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, doesn't have the authority to enact this sentence. But Pilate does, and so Jesus finds himself standing in Pilate's palace, on trial.



Pilate seems to know that the whole thing is a set up. He's hardly interested in justice and goes through the motions. "Are you the king of the Jews?" I imagine a level of disdain, sarcasm: "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus puts Pilate on trial by asking in return: "Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?" What do you think? What kind of a king do you think I am? Am I a challenge to your authority, or not? What if I am a king, like Caesar, or the Messiah?

"I'm not a Jew, am I?" Pilate answers. This is all about your people handing you over to me. So what's the issue? Jesus can't be any clearer. There's a clash of kingdoms: "My kingdom is not of this world... my kingdom is not from here." Jesus is from another place altogether. He has come down from above. "The Word became

flesh and made his dwelling among us," John explains in the opening words of his gospel. Jesus' kingdom is above all human power and authority, yet not beyond it. Jesus' birth has brought God's kingdom down to earth, Jesus' teaching has grounded God's kingdom rule in the lives of flesh and blood people, his followers who are born from above, who are born of water and the Spirit.

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders." The word Jesus uses to describe his servants can mean "the king's retinue". It's also used for the temple police. What a rag-tag bunch his followers were. No uniform, little education. Judas betrayed him. Peter did fight but Jesus rebuked him, because violence was not the kingdom way. And then they all abandoned him. And then Jesus alone is left. No trappings of might. No weapons but his word.

Pilate asks Jesus, “You are a king, then?” Jesus turns his question back on him. “That’s what you say. I was born to rule, but from the throne of the cross. I came to speak and to live the truth of God: of God’s creation of all humanity in his image, of the rebellion of all people against God’s rule and authority, of the prodigal love of the Father for his broken creation. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Pilate doesn’t grasp this truth. “What is truth?” he retorts. He’s looking for a theory, but the truth is staring him in the face, and like the Jewish leaders, he has chosen the path of expediency, or doing whatever it takes, rather than doing what is right. Only Jesus will do what is right, and in his obedient death he will destroy the power of evil that infests all human power, and through his resurrection he will bring in God’s kingdom rule, the upside-down, topsy-turvy world, where the first are last, and the last first, where the poor are blessed and the rich sent away empty, the meek rule the world and the proud are brought down from their thrones.



“My kingdom is not of this world.” Christians make a very big mistake when we confuse the kingdom of God and its values with any one political system or party. Things get even worse when the church gets into bed with secular power and tries to force its values on other by clever politicking. We, the people of God’s kingdom, owe our ultimate allegiance to God. He is our King. Jesus, his Son, is our crucified

and risen Lord. The Holy Spirit is our wisdom, strength and guide. God’s Word is our manifesto. Love is the truth we bear.

This stands in absolute contrast to the theological vision of ISIS, for example, whose vision of Islam and Allah’s rule allows for the killing of infidels and idolators, that is, anyone who does not submit to Allah. Their hope is that, through creating fear and weakening resistance in acts of terror or war, all people will either convert to Islam or live under its subjugation. In ISIS thinking, there is no distinction between political rule and God’s rule.



This is not Jesus’ way. This is not the way of God the Father.

Instead, God’s kingdom is made real, right here and right now through the opposite: servanthood, not power; love, not hate; compassion, not violence; by acts of sacrifice in daily life, by our honesty and integrity, by our compassion and our concern for justice, by our worship and our prayer. We have submitted our allegiance to Christ the King. In our worship today we ask him

to shape our lives so that they reflect the values of his kingdom. So that others do hear and do see who God is, and how his heart beats with love for them. This is the way of the cross. It is the way of Christ.

I want to leave you with this challenge today, to use your spiritual imagination, and to ask God to make your life look like this. “The kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like on earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. Imagine if God ruled the nations, and not Obama, Putin, Xi Jinping... Every aspect of personal and communal life would experience a radical reversal — peace-making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than hubris, embrace rather than exclusion, etc. The ancient Hebrews had a marvellous word for this, shalom, or human well-being.”



This is our kingdom calling, in our daily lives. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Amen.