

AN UNUSUAL ENCOUNTER

Daniel 7. 9-10, 13-14

Revelation 1. 4b-8

John 18. 33-37

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This morning I invite you to think for a moment of the great encounters that you have witnessed between important leaders of our time. A few of us will remember 19th May 1943, when Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt met together to plan the Cross-Channel Landing that would eventually become D-Day. Others of us will remember the date of June 3rd 1961, when John F. Kennedy met with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, with the intention of having an informal exchange of views. That summit did not go well, and shortly afterwards the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union escalated. Or perhaps you can remember 5th February 2010, when Gordon Brown and Brian Cowen, respectively Prime Ministers of England and Ireland, signed an agreement by which Britain handed over control of the police and justice system to Northern Ireland.

Each of these meetings brought together people with considerable fame and power; and each of these meetings had historical consequences – good or bad – that can still be appreciated today.

The encounter that we have heard briefly described in the 18th chapter of St John's gospel is unusual, to say the least. During this meeting (which in actual fact turns out to be a trial), Pontius Pilate, the fifth Prefect of the Roman province of Judea, meets our Lord Jesus Christ. In his ignorance Pilate does not realise that he, a powerful politician in the service of Roman emperor Tiberius, is standing before yet another leader with powers far greater than his own.

Pilate begins his interrogation with a question that is found in all of the other Gospel texts: ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ St John’s Gospel account, however, has many more references to kingship than do the other Gospel texts. Kingship will become the governing motif in John’s description of the trial; the word ‘king’ is used no fewer than nine times in his account. Throughout this trial narrative, there is an interplay between politics and religion. You see, Pilate was actually worried. He was aware of the Jews’ hope for a King and a Messiah; and he knew that this hope posed a political threat to the Romans’ governance in Judea.

As is typical of Jesus throughout John’s Gospel, he responds to Pilate’s question with a question of his own: ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ Our Lord’s words question whether Pilate can act on his own, or only in response to others. Jesus’ question also signals the direction that the rest of the trial will take, because he turns the tables on Pilate and now becomes the interrogator.

In his response to our Lord’s question, Pilate reveals his disdain for the Jews. ‘I am not a Jew, am I?’ This disdain will characterise his dealings with the Jewish authorities throughout the trial. Pilate then asks, ‘What have you done?’

In addressing Pilate’s two questions – ‘Are you a king?’ and ‘What have you done?’ – Jesus starts by defining what his kingdom is *not*. He says, ‘my kingdom (and here, a better translation for the Greek word *basileia* would be ‘kingship’ or ‘reign’) is not from this world.’ John’s Gospel has repeatedly emphasised that our Lord originates from God; and his kingship (or kingdom) has the same origins. Jesus’ kingship, unlike the kingship of Emperor Tiberius, is not obtained and secured by force. Christ will soon show the world that he is not only the Servant King, but also the Suffering Servant.

But when Pilate returns to his original question and says, ‘So you are a king’, we see that he believes that his earlier political assumptions have been confirmed. Our Lord, however, neither directly affirms nor denies Pilate’s words; he leaves the responsibility for that decision to Pilate.

In response to Pilate’s question, ‘What have you done?’ Jesus simply says, ‘For this I came to the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ Our Lord’s presence in the world, and the word of truth that he speaks, will require a response and decision from everyone. Although Jesus is nominally on trial here, he is the one who testifies to the truth; and he as King of Kings will judge the world according to its response to his witness.

This leads us to ask ourselves this morning, ‘have we allowed Christ to be our King?’ Do we seek to let him rule in our hearts and wills, or do we let other powers and events control our lives?

In his thought-provoking book called *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard claims that we all have our little kingdoms in life. A kingdom, Willard says, is any area of life where *my will* and *my desires* determine what happens and what does not happen. Personally, I suspect that there are numerous little kingdoms in our lives, and they are found everywhere: at home, at work, in our relationships, in our habits and behaviours, and in our aspirations and goals. Wherever you and I have set up these little kingdoms, they designate areas of our lives where we have arranged things on our own terms. These kingdoms include all the situations of our lives in which we continue to call the shots.

But I’m sure that you’ll agree that these little human kingdoms actually hinder the advancement of the kingdom of God, because in his kingdom, *God’s* desires, *God’s* dreams for his creation, *God’s* will and *God’s* intentions rule. There is no place for

little human kingdoms in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, our lives are supposed to mirror God's design for us.

May God give us the honesty, courage and resolve to surrender our little human kingdoms to the King of Kings; and may we respond quickly to the call to begin to participate in the activity of the kingdom of our Lord.

Yes, his kingdom is not of this world; but it is real here and now. It is present whenever we pray as Jesus encouraged us to do. It is present when we reach out to those who are difficult or unlovable. Our Lord's kingdom is present whenever we defend the cause of those who are unjustly treated. His kingdom is present whenever we refuse to go along with some scheme, because we think that in doing so, we would not honour Jesus. This kingdom is present whenever we allow our Lord to take control of our material goods and money. It is present whenever we allow Jesus to have his say about our career and our future. This kingdom is present wherever our Lord nurtures behaviours and lifestyles that show the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This kingdom is present whenever and wherever we will allow our Lord to *have his way* in our hearts and in our lives.

Dear friends, when the King of Kings came to this earth, he announced the arrival of the kingdom of God. That kingdom is not pie-in-the-sky. It is real, and you and I are in it now.

Amen.