

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17A)

August 31, 2008

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Romans 12:9-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Matthew 16:21-28

From the Way of Caesar to the Way of Christ

I can't say a word this morning until I thank God for the glories of late summer, this sumptuous season when a person can wander for hours in a country field, savoring blackberries and watching dragonflies and cedar waxwings. Farms in these parts smell like fresh-cut hay, and if we tend a garden, our hands probably smell of basil or the tang of tomato plants. The goldfinches are getting fat on sunflower seeds, and the first maple leaves have begun to turn. It's a season of harvest and beauty, and the last line of today's psalm probably says it all: "LORD, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where your glory resides" [Psalm 26:8].

It's also Labor Day weekend, and this morning we give thanks for the men and women who fought for, and succeeded in giving us, the minimum wage and the forty-hour week, unemployment compensation, health and safety regulations in the workplace, and the right of workers to organize for collective bargaining. We give thanks today for those whose work benefits the community, and we hold in prayer those who have no job, or jobs that do not satisfy.

I also need to mention that for many of us, this has been a week of immersion in the world of politics, as we listened to speech after speech from the Democratic National Convention, and to the commentaries that preceded and followed those speeches. More speeches and commentaries will come our way as the Republican Party begins its national convention tomorrow. The battle for the Presidency has been joined, and as we head toward November, Americans will hear competing arguments about how to make this country prosper and how to keep our country secure; how to close the gap between rich and poor, and to heal the enmity between women and men, between black and white, as well as brown, red, and yellow peoples; how to provide for those who are sick or disabled; how to offer a world-class education to all children, not just the children of privilege; how to stop the drift toward endless war; how to protect the well-being of the planet upon which all human life depends.

For better or worse, we live in a time when it seems to be politically expedient, even politically necessary, for candidates to call themselves Christian, although you have to wonder whether we will be able to maintain our Constitution's separation of church and state if being a Christian becomes a prerequisite for political office. Still, if some people in this country – in fact, a good many people – consider being a Christian one measure of a political candidate's readiness for leadership, then let's go for it – let's talk about what we should look for in a Christian leader and what values should shape a society that is informed by Christianity.

Maybe there is no better place to begin than with today's Gospel. This passage from Matthew 16 comes right after the passage we heard last Sunday, in which Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah. As we heard last week, Jesus and his disciples walked all the way to Caesarea Philippi, a city more than twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee and named after Caesar Augustus, "the emperor whose regime occupied and dominated Jesus' people and homeland,"¹ and after Philip, the local ruler of the region. Jesus took his band of friends all the way to a place whose name symbolized the political machine of the Roman Empire, as if Jesus were intentionally walking into the very belly of the beast.

Standing in that urban symbol of his people's oppression, Jesus asked his friends, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter made his bold reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Among other things, that was a daring political statement to make, for to Peter and the followers of Jesus, the Messiah was expected to come as a conquering warrior, a liberating king who would sweep the Romans out of Palestine by force. It was also politically dangerous to call Jesus "the Son of the living God," for the Caesars of Rome called themselves "sons of the gods." It was as if Peter were saying, "The Greek and Roman gods are only idols, and they do not and cannot make the empire legitimate; the true and living God gives Jesus the authority and power to overturn the empire and to set us free."

Jesus praised Peter for his confession of faith, and named him the rock on which he would build his church. But immediately we come to today's passage, in which Jesus makes the first of four predictions that he will suffer and die, and rise on the third day. Peter is shocked. He associates the Messiah with victory and glory, not with suffering and death. If Jesus is the liberating king, the revolutionary leader whom God anointed to overthrow the Roman occupation, then, as author Brian McLaren puts it, "the one thing Jesus cannot do is be captured, imprisoned,

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007, p. 109. These paragraphs on Matthew 16 are based on McLaren's argument.

tortured and killed. No, he must capture, imprison, humiliate, and defeat their oppressors.”²

Peter takes Jesus aside and vehemently rebukes him. “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” [Mt 16:22]. What comes next, McLaren calls “one of the most dramatic cases of conceptual whiplash ever recorded in literature anywhere.”³ Jesus turns and says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” Just a moment before, Jesus had blessed Peter and called him a rock; now Peter is a stumbling block, an adversary. Just a moment before, Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven; now he calls Peter an agent of the devil, because Peter is tempting him to take the way of power. Jesus used almost exactly the same words during his temptations in the wilderness, when the devil took him to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and promised them to Jesus if he would fall down and worship him [Mt 4:10]. “Away with you, Satan!” Jesus cried then, and almost word for word cries again now, as Peter gives voice to the temptation that Jesus is grappling with inside himself and to which he says a resounding No.

Peter was right when he confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God. But – as McLaren puts it – “Peter was ... wrong about what those terms meant. They didn’t mean a violent and coercive leader who would conquer through domination; they meant a leader who would be victorious through being defeated, who would demonstrate power through vulnerability, and who would establish a kingdom not of violent conquest but of faith, hope, and love.”⁴

Today’s Gospel passage gives us clues about the questions we need to ask our candidates for political office, whether they be from the left, right, or center, whether they be Democrats, Republicans, or anything else.

Do their policies follow the way of Caesar or the way of Christ?

The way of Caesar is the way of ‘power over’, of seeking prosperity through grabbing and hoarding everything we can for ourselves, never mind the cries of the poor or the cries of a groaning Earth.

The way of Caesar is the way of seeking security through violence and military domination, the path of silencing, torturing and wiping out our enemies.

The way of Caesar looks out for “number one” -- and no one else.

² Ibid. p. 112.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 312.

The way of Caesar believes in what theologian Dominic Crossan calls “peace through victory... peace through the destruction of enemies... peace through domination.”⁵

By contrast, the way of Christ is the way of ‘power with’, the way that values forgiveness and reparation more than revenge -- honest dialogue and mutual vulnerability more than manipulation, domination, and control.

The way of Christ builds prosperity by setting the rich free from our addiction to material possessions and by setting the poor free from misery and want.

The way of Christ finds security not in hoarding but in sharing, and seeks peace not through violence but through “justice, generosity, and mutual concern.”⁶

In short, it follows the leadings not of fear but of love.

Maybe it’s worth noting that in December 2006, “retiring United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan rejected domination as a response to terrorism. [He said,] ‘Against such threats as these, no nation can make itself secure by seeking supremacy over all others.’ Instead, in an application of Jesus’ ‘golden rule’ to international relations, he said that each nation increases its own security by safeguarding the security of its neighbors.”⁷

Of course it is not just our nation and its political leaders who must choose every day between the way of Caesar or the way of Christ – we ourselves are called by Jesus to pick up our cross and follow him. Flinging around Jesus’ name and calling ourselves Christian is hardly good enough -- Peter himself in today’s passage calls Jesus “Lord” and is soundly chastised by the one who says elsewhere that “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” [Mt 7:21].

That is the grace that we pray for this morning, the grace to follow where Jesus leads us, both as individuals and as a nation -- the grace to see through the lies of empire and the temptation to domination, the grace to lay down our lives for each other and for the well-being of the world.

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire*, Harper San Francisco, 2007, Chapter 1, cited by McLaren, p.159.

⁶ McLaren, op. cit., p. 159.

⁷ Ibid. p. 316.