
How to Fight Like 'Christ the King'

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Reign of Christ – Year B

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend”
—*The Hymnal* no. 388, vs. 5: O Worship the King

Jesus answered [Pilate], “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

In today’s political climate, if there’s one thing we can all agree on, I’d say it has something to do with fighting. Whatever it is we can all agree on, it’s probably not that amiable slogan, “Just be nice.” Nope, if you want complete agreement I’d say, ‘You can forget that one!’ Maybe you can get a good majority of people to agree that we should all ‘be nice,’ or agree to that other benign sentiment, ‘Can we all just try to get along?’ But on my gloomier days, I think it’s probably less than 50% of my fellow Americans. Instead, if you really want a hundred percent agreement nowadays, you’re more likely to get it with the proverbial compromise, “If we can agree on nothing else, let’s agree to disagree.”

However, for my part here’s my own candidate for a hundred percent agreement. Moreover, mine has the additional virtue of connecting those of us gathered here with today’s gospel reading. I mean specifically the verse where Jesus says to Pilate: “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.” I think that, in connection with that reference to fighting, and no matter what your position on any issue, cause or persuasion, we can all agree that we are all learning to fight for what we believe nowadays. Would you agree to that? Or maybe you prefer another slogan that I will quote in my own paraphrase: ‘If you’re not absolutely outraged about something nowadays, you’re just not paying attention.’ What do you think? Can we get near unanimous agreement on that one?

You see: even I myself, who like to pride myself on a commitment to nonviolence—if not to absolute pacifism, even I myself have begun to collect more aggressive quotations, more in-your-face slogans, just to fortify myself for making it through the day. You’ve likely heard me quote one of my favorites from the most popular comedienne of my generation, Phyllis Diller: ‘Never go to bed angry; stay up and fight!’ That’s the spirit, huh? Married to her stage husband named ‘Fang,’ that was the gospel according to Diller: she proclaimed it was better to purge any venom from a day with Fang on the possibility that you might get a good night’s sleep afterwards.

But of course we’re confronted with a different gospel in today’s readings; the gospel appointed for this last Sunday of the church year. Yes, if you haven’t been paying attention, it’s the last Sunday of our long, Pentecost season; the Sunday just before Advent and the beginning of a new church year. “Christ the King” it’s called in our Anglican or Episcopal church tradition, and I prefer that title to the more contemporary, politically correct version, “The Reign of Christ.” And then there’s the far more elaborate title for today that our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers call: “The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.” But the common theme in all those titles is that today provides the capstone, the climax, or the crowning of the church year, before we begin another year.

In that context, today’s reading from the Gospel according to John provides a fitting scenario. There stands Jesus the prisoner; arrested by his own ethnic community, and put on trial by the mightiest power on earth in his time, the Roman

Empire.



[Ecce Homo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate) ("Behold the Man"), Antonio Ciseri's depiction of Pilate presenting a scourged Jesus to the people of Jerusalem. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate

But isn't he also majestic in his dignity and calm? "You say that I am a king," he answers Pilate. "For this I was born, and ... came into the world ... Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

And now, more than two thousand years later, one third of all people alive today claim to 'listen to the truth of that voice.' In addition, we here are assembled today because we are among the millions who claim at least nominal allegiance to this unlikely king. However, what kind of a king has followers who don't take up arms in his defense? "A kingdom not from this world," Jesus told Pilate; "a kingdom not from here." And what kind of kingdom is that, we may persist in asking? Reading John's gospel, I personally want to ask: Could it be the kind of kingdom where the reign of God is so assured that we too, Christ's followers, can also share in his majestic and calm dignity? —a kingdom where if we fight at all it's a qualitatively different kind of fight from the conventional fighting of our adversaries?

Indeed, there are too many Christians among us who fight viciously in the name of Christ. 'Dear Jesus,' begins an ironic slogan that I keep in my collection, "Dear Jesus, please save me from your followers.' It's funny in a tragic sort of way, isn't it? And with a similar irony I share with you again (as I have often done before) that quotation from the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi: 'Everyone knows that Christianity is a nonviolent religion except Christians.'

Now what would it take for us, and for other disciples of Christ, to be so assured of his supreme reign; so assured that we could rest confident that his kingdom does not require conventional fighting? What if we could be so assured of his lordship over all time and creation that we would not feel the need to resort to conventional forms of fighting for the sake of his honor or in order to achieve or to help his kingdom come?

That last question reminds me of a similar query I heard just a few weeks ago. It was voiced by one of the delegates who attended our annual Diocesan Council meeting. He posed his question to our celebrity guest, the Presiding Bishop of all our Episcopal churches in the nation, Bishop Michael Curry. The question arose during a question and answer session at breakfast that Saturday morning.

"How can we 'love like Jesus,'" he began, and here I paraphrase the rest on his question:

"How can we 'love like Jesus' and, at the very same time, stand up for justice and strongly confront wrongdoing in people when we find them violating the humanity of others?"

Now you may not know this, but that phrase, 'love like Jesus,' is lifted directly out of the Purpose Statement of our Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. It was adopted in 2015, early in the episcopate of our current Bishop Rob Wright. Here is the full statement:

We challenge ourselves and the world to love like Jesus as we worship joyfully, serve compassionately, and grow

spiritually.

(Spanish: Nos desafiamos a nosotros mismos y al mundo para amar como Jesús mientras adoramos con alegría, servimos con compasión, y crecemos espiritualmente.)

That's the statement adopted by the clergy and delegates to our Annual Council in 2015. It culminated from a year-long, diocesan-wide discussion begun at Annual Council in 2014, when Bishop Rob asked clergy and delegates to consider what the purpose of the diocese might be. <https://www.episcopalatlanta.org/Diocese/Called-to-Purpose/>

Now its first clause, 'challenging ourselves and the world to love like Jesus,' provided the background for the concern voiced by one of this past Council's delegates. From that perspective, he posed a question that acknowledges the truth of Jesus' claim that his followers do not engage in conventional fighting. To the contrary, as scripture says in the Letter to the Ephesians (6:12):

Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Now here's how Bishop Curry responded to that delegate's question. He commended to all of us the nonviolent direct action of Dr. Martin Luther King and the 1960s civil rights movement, on the one hand. Then, with a second reference he also commended the Mennonite conflict resolution tradition. In both cases, he elaborated, we are enjoined to confront those who violate the humanity of others, on the one hand. On the other hand, we do so with an insistence on championing the humanity of the perpetrators as well.

And so the Presiding Bishop gave a 'both/and' kind of answer; not an 'either/or' kind of answer. The humanity of both victims and perpetrators is in our care and keeping, not either one or the other; both/and' not 'either/or.' Now admittedly, it can be very challenging to do both: to keep in our care and concern the humanity of both parties to every side of every conflict. But that is precisely one of the faith challenges of our tradition: How does Jesus as the Prince of Peace instruct us to meet that challenge?

Well, here's how I understand the tradition of nonviolent direct action, which both Gandhi and his activist successor Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledged to be Christ-like. Sometimes called 'nonviolent confrontation,' the tradition provides creative ways to bring the plight of victims directly to the attention of their perpetrators. It is particularly intent on getting the attention of perpetrators who are indifferent to the plight of their victims; to bring to their attention the harm that their actions and policies wreak on others; and to do so in ways that appeal to their humanity as well. That is, the tradition aims to save or rescue their humanity as well.

Again, in today's angry political climate that kind of care and concern, for both sides of every conflict, may be near impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, that's our calling, Christian friends, and if we attempt it we may find that God's grace is sufficient to achieve it—for us and through us. But if we incur failure in our efforts to rely on that grace, we may nonetheless do so with a calm assurance in the power of our king, and even a with a majestic sense of our own dignity—a majesty and dignity like that of Jesus standing before Pilate in our gospel reading today.

On the one hand, he declared to Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. On the other hand we may also rely on that majestic prophecy from the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible; a prophecy that crowns the gospel good news, as the climax and capstone for the end of the ages: 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ' (Revelation 11:15).

Yes, followers of Christ, on the one hand Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. On the other hand, however, that otherworldly kingdom has exerted the most awesome moral and humanitarian power in the world for more than two millennia. Thanks be to God! And yes, at the end of another church year we're in the midst of a ferocious political climate that too often includes lethal carnage. But may God be glorified all the more, because we have been graced with a King whose spiritual power has been conforming our world ever more deeply and more widely to become the 'beloved community' of our God and of God's Christ. In that spirit may we all anticipate the full gospel advent of Christ the King, while we also:

challenge ourselves and the world to love like Jesus as we worship joyfully, serve compassionately, and grow

spiritually.

Amen.

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