The Last Sunday after Pentecost

22 November 2015

All Saints’, Peterborough, N. H.

The grown children of a woman I know remember how, when they were small, their mother sometimes responded to rowdy misbehavior by simply saying “One...” If the misbehavior continued, she might even say “Two...” It almost never had to go further than that. Her children recall this with considerable admiration: it had never been laid down how far the sequence would go before there were serious consequences, nor what the consequences would be. “One...” was a simple reminder that they were dealing with someone in authority, whose displeasure they did not want to incur. Their mother was not mean, or vindictive; they respected her authority more than they feared it. But it was there. It was there all the time, even though she was pleasant and they got along very well most of the time.

Authority comes in different forms: *moral* authority, like that mother’s; the authority of *expertise*, like that of a teacher to a pupil; the authority of *duress*, like that of government. And often they overlap. Children do know, to varying extents, that their elders have had more experience and therefore may possibly be worth listening to, as well as having the power to deny them things; but they also know the limits of their parents’ skill in social media. Wise elders know this, too, and don’t try to assert authority in areas where they are at a disadvantage. And most of us (though clearly not all) would rather have willing assent from our charges than be constantly in need of the threat of force.

Pontius Pilate, as prefect of Judæa for the Roman Empire, already had his hands full dealing with a fractious, resentful occupied province, prone to take offense at anything (such as military insignia brought into Jerusalem) that even hinted at idolatry. That, and the constant rumors of a Messiah who would restore an independent Jewish kingdom, made for an unsettled climate. And Pilate seems to have been prone to give offense just to show he could. It had gotten him into trouble with his boss before.

So along comes this new would-be Messiah. Pilate knows the drill. The Jewish authorities will be against him, because the Romans are on the whole better rulers than some others, and Temple worship goes on undisturbed. Excitable lay people will follow him with enthusiasm until he is put down, and then they will subside, disappointed, until the next one comes along. Pilate simply has to interrogate him, reveal his sedition, give him a good flogging and send him back where he came from.

But the interrogation, formal as it is, at the judgment-seat in the praetorium, goes awry. Pilate asks the first question, cleverly putting it in what he presumes would be the man’s own terms. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Two possible answers: one, why, yes, I am! to which the response is, no, you’re not, that would be Caesar; allow me and my legionaries to demonstrate. The second possible answer, me? King of the Jews? Certainly not! I’m just a humble preacher from Galilee, no threat to anybody, to which the response is, fine, go away, explain that to your precious followers, and don’t cause any trouble.

But it doesn’t go like that. To the question “Are you the King of the Jews?” the man responds with another question: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Is this a matter in which you take a personal interest, or are you just checking out a rumor? Pilate, as a man on the rise in the Roman service, is not used to this kind of thing. He has the power of life and death over the man, yet the man refuses to be either cowed or defiant. He is under the impression that this is a conversation, as though they were having a cup of wine on Pilate’s veranda in Caesarea. He seems unaware of either the threat or the irony of the question. He simply asks Pilate for information, as though extending an offer of friendship.

The urbane mask drops from Pilate, and he recoils in anger—perhaps even a hint of fear? “Am I a Jew?” Do you think I get involved in these absurd little obsessions you people go in for? Do you think I am actually interested in you? Just tell me what you’re up to.

The man responds: my rule, my authority, isn’t the kind you’re wondering about. It isn’t from this world. I have plenty of followers, but they’re not an army, and they never will be. My authority comes from somewhere else.

But Pilate presses him: So you do have authority? “You are a king, then?” To which the man seems to agree: Well, if “king” is the word you’re after, fine. But what I am really here for, and have been ever since I arrived in this world, is to bear witness to Truth. “Everyone who belongs to Truth is listening to my voice.”

We know how the interview turns out: we read it during Holy Week. But it is worth sitting for a minute with that description. We call this the Feast of Christ the King. But in this reading it would seem that perhaps we should call it the Feast of Christ the Witness to Truth. And yet, the Witness to Truth has authority, authority which all the proclamations and pronouncements and saber-rattling and prisons and executions cannot overcome. At its best, earthly authority attempts to align itself with truth and to be subject to truth’s correction. At its worst, the powers of this world substitute their own reality for truth, corrupting and destroying the creatures of God.

Sad to say, this happens even in the realm of faith. It is easy for us to turn Christ’s saying on its head, as though he had said, “Those who are listening to my voice are the ones on the side of truth.” But he is not issuing a challenge, or a threat. He is making an observation of fact: Those who belong to truth, for whom truth is a supreme value, are hearing some resonance of my voice, the voice from beyond this world, the Word by whom all things were made.

The Witness to Truth is not powerless, not without allies. They are all over, in every age. Insofar as we too attempt to be witnesses, we are part of that company. It is a company of adventurers, but under authority, authority gladly recognized and submitted to because it is that of One who has not hesitated to put himself in our place. We are willing to risk; he has risked everything—and Truth prevailed. If that is kingship, if that is rule, so be it. To that, at least, with grateful hearts, we can submit.

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