

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 17, 2019
Rev. Dr. David McKane

“Paint it Just!”

2 Samuel 23:1-7, Psalm 132, John 18: 33-38.

Prayer. King of Kings yet son of Mary, you lift the brush and paint the morning; you stretch the canvas and frame the world. Touch our lives with the pigment of your grace and paint us just. Amen.

Have you ever thought of yourself as an artist? Perhaps not in the sense of a Tom Thompson or an A.Y. Jackson or even London’s famous Paul Peel or Jeffrey John Willmore, but have you? Perhaps not in the sense of one of our soloists or the talented Torin or Pat, our piper from last week, but we are all artists. I bet you have never thought of that and yet day in and day out we fashion for ourselves a world. We create a community to which we add colour, perspective, depth, into which we paint ourselves deed by deed as an artist paints a canvas brush stroke by brush stroke.

The Gospel writers are artists lifting up for us in bold relief the life of Jesus, contrasting the colour of that life with others around it, letting the light catch him as dramatically as a Rembrandt or a Homer Watson or a subtly as a Karsh or a Richard Bain or as gently as a Monet. Take the Gospel lesson for today. John paints Jesus in stark relief over against the unbelieving Pilate. Scholars agree that this exchange is entirely the work of John. John is writing long after the outcome. He knows the verdict. He knows about the crucifixion and the resurrection. From the very beginning John wants to paint Jesus as guilty of the death sentence according to the law. This is not history that John is writing, this is theology, so John paints in theological brush strokes.

“Are you a king?” asks Pilate....

“...My kingdom is not of this world,” replies Jesus, which is why neither Pilate nor John’s contemporaries are surprised that no political or military force was raised. Thus John allows Jesus to paint the concept of “kingship” in a new light, to give it a different interpretation. Kingship is moved out of the realm of political power and political abuse and into the life of One who comes to testify to God’s truth which all Kings and Queens and rulers claim to represent.

Proclaiming the truth, being the truth is what makes Jesus a King. He comes from and bridges knowledge of a world that is alive with the reality of God as opposed to the reality of the world. To which Pilate responds, "What is truth?"

Now Pilate's question has been freighted with many meanings. Whole libraries could be filled with the books and sermons that have been written on this very question. John wants to paint a single meaning, that truth is something very different from the world Pilate inhabits and understands, which brings us to the second canvas.

What is the truth about in the world we inhabit and where do we locate it? What is the truth behind the Presidential Impeachment hearings continuing this week in Washington, D.C. or the hearings on genocide in Myanmar at the International Court of Justice in the Hague? What is the truth behind the melting of the Polar caps, global warming, the dismantling of one of the best educational and health systems in Canada? What is the truth behind Jason Kenny's demands for a pipeline and an Albertan pension plan neither of which he championed during his eleven years in the Federal government of Prime Minister Harper? What is the truth about the world in which we live?

Truth for John and for Jesus and indeed for the Bible is bound to justice, to God's desire for us and for the world in opposition to our desire or to our government's desire. This is why the church often finds itself in opposition to the values of its own society or makes pronouncements which make many people uncomfortable. There is a lot of Pilate in us, you see, and there is a lot of us in Pilate. John knows that. John knows that. That is why he paints Pilate as a foil for Jesus.

Julia Roberts earns \$10 -15 million per movie and Food Banks exist precariously from month to month. Where is the justice in that?

David Thompson is worth \$31 billion. That is 16 times more than the combined exports of Rwanda and South Sudan. Does God love David Thompson more than the children of Rwanda and South Sudan?

Walmart is wealthier than 160 countries in our world. Think about that for a minute or for the rest of the day and most of what we buy from Walmart is made by underpaid people in countries whose national budget Walmart could pay out of petty cash. One could speak of things closer to home, of the rising tide of poverty, of "boil water" advisories on too many Canadian First Nations Reserves, of mental health patients abandoned, of a lack of affordable housing and a lack of political will. Do I sound radical? Do I sound like the reincarnation of a Nellie McClung or a Tommy Douglas or a clone of Stephen Lewis? The commonwealth of Christ can be painted in the broad-brush strokes of socialism or of conservatism, of

communism or of capitalism. You can paint it whatever colour you wish but you must always paint it just.

Justice for the poor as well as for the wealthy. Justice for the enfranchised as well for the disenfranchised. Justice for the landlord as well as for the tenant. Justice for the borrower as well as for the lender.

Benjamin Disraeli once said that justice is nothing more than truth in action. Justice, you see, civilizes humanity and in turn civilizes us. The “kingdom” which Jesus and John are talking about is not some place to which we all go when we die, when we have earned enough Air Miles or Brownie points. Nor is it some “end of the world apocalypse” when God will descend wrapped in thunder to sort out our unholy mess. The “kingdom” that Jesus talked about is around us all of the time. It is present to us if we choose to honour it. It is about living by a different sense of what constitutes power and how power is used. It is about living by a different sense of what is important and who is important. It is about living so that even when things are at their worst, hope is more contagious than despair and involvement more important than indifference, and forgiveness more important than revenge and sacrificial love more prevalent than selfishness.

God does not change the world by some thunderbolt out of the blue but by entering into the world’s struggles for justice, by naming the evil that some people commit and the pain that some systems inflict, by proving in his own body that even the worst that the world can do cannot stamp out hope, cannot deaden the desire for freedom, cannot crucify and kill love. That’s the scandal of the Incarnation, away in a manger, no crib for a bed...

Which brings us to the third canvas, the one that you and I paint upon. The human ideal presumed and indeed preached by contemporary political theory in current Western culture is that of the autonomous individual. The fact that such an ideal is pure fiction is disregarded as we rush to canonize those who exemplify the ideal, the Mark Zuckerberg’s or Oprah Winfrey’s of our society.

What if having achieved financial success we find ourselves starved for intimacy and hungry for community, even a gated community, the desire for a public place where the private self can be transcended, sacrificed even in order to attain the personal and interpersonal, some movement from self-centered to other-centered. That’s why wealthy people create public foundations to give away much of what they have amassed. The stories contained in the Bible, the gospel proclaimed by Christ’s church, the message Jesus came to share with us involves that kind of movement, that kind of transformation, that kind of redemption, what Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard calls “grounding the self in the power that constitutes it.”

And we know what that struggle feels like. We are stretched by it every day. It is one of the reasons we belong to the church. Christianity today stands at a crossroads between two diametrically opposed positions with respect to the “Kingdom of God.” On the one side are the “conservative evangelicals” in all denominations who believe that the kingdom of God will occur at some time in the distant future, that it is God’s work and not ours, that it will come in God’s time, that all we have to do is be ready and wait. On the other side are the “post Enlightenment” Christians of the post Christian era, Christians who think of the kingdom of God in relation to social and ethical objectives and regard themselves as agents of change, as provocateurs, “instruments of God’s peace,” to use the words of St. Francis, “channels of God’s grace, Fed-Ex deliverers of God’s love, people who pray daily with Jesus that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and spend much of their lives to make it so, paradoxically finding their true selves as they lose their false selves.

We are all artists. We are all painting a vision of society and painting ourselves into that canvas deed by daily deed. Paint it whatever colour you choose but paint it just! Paint it just!

Amen! And to God be the glory.