

Sermon Proper 29 2018

November 25, 2018

John 18:33-37

Grace, mercy, peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on Jesus our King, especially as He speaks of His Kingdom in these words, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”**

Jesus leaves no ambiguity in those words. His kingdom is not of this world. It's a different kind of Kingdom, it doesn't work like we ordinarily think of a kingdom working. In fact, Jesus even uses a specific example to make that point. What's that? If it were, **“my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.”** You see, in this passage Jesus is here before Pilate, just before He's about to be crucified, and He's standing trial because the Jews handed Him over in anger that He wouldn't free them from Caesar. Think of the irony here: they hand Him over to Pilate to be crucified as a King who is a threat to Caesar because He wouldn't be crowned a King who would free them from Caesar. But in the midst of this trial, Jesus is describing the difference of His Kingdom by saying that if it were a regular kingdom, His **“His servants would have been fighting”** for Him not to be delivered. And these words give a most interesting picture. You see this could be literally translated, **“my under-rowers would have been agonizing that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.”** His under-rowers would have been agonizing for Him. Yes, Jesus is a King but not a normal one, if He were, His servants would fight for Him.

Now as I say that, I want to take a second and explain those words. In fact, as I'm saying **“under-rowers”** you might be wondering what I'm even saying. You see this word that is translated **“servants”** is thought to have as its root a word that is connected to rowing. And think about how rowing works. You have one person who calls out a cadence for the team and they row in unison on his signal. Those rowers following the signal are under-rowers. The caller calls, and they move on that action. These are the servants of which Jesus speaks. He's talking about servants who hear the call of their master and take heed. In fact, you have another word for servant that is often used, the word that's most often translated as slave in the New Testament. That word is *doulos*, where the word *doula* comes from if you've ever heard of someone having a doula for a birth. That word *doulos* has an implication of not doing something out of freedom. It's

a bond-servant. Paul often speaks of being a bond-servant of Jesus. But this servant here is not bound. It's a service in freedom, it's the hearing of the voice of the one calling and doing that willingly.

And what would they be doing? They would be fighting, agonizing, to prevent His handing over to the Jews. And this agonizing is a fighting. It's the fighting that an athlete would do to attain to the lofty goal of victory in the arena. You see in very old Greek the *agon* was the stadium. And that stadium became so associated with the competition and striving that went on inside that the word came to be understood with that same sense. The agonizing, the fighting, the striving would be what these under-rowers would be doing to prevent Jesus from being handed over; if Jesus's Kingdom were of this world. But Jesus said this to make a point. His Kingdom is not of this world.

So what does this mean? Does this mean there are no under-rowers in this Kingdom? Does this mean there is no striving, no agonizing in this Kingdom? Well ask yourself this. Are there under-rowers, are there voluntary servants in the Kingdom of God? Is there agonizing by servants in the Kingdom of God?

Well, we have to acknowledge that none of us comes into the Kingdom of God by our own reason or strength, do we? None of us can will ourselves into faith. As we say in the explanation of the creed, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." But once we have been called, are we free? Does that faith give us freedom? It does, and although our sin still bucks against this, we do willingly serve our Lord. We do "row" under His command, doing what He wants out of the freedom His love has given us. So yes, there are under-rowers.

But what about agonizing? Are we still fighting and struggling? We better be. If you aren't struggling in your daily life as a Christian you need to examine yourself. Your daily life as a Christian should involve that picking up of the cross daily to live under it, to drown the Old Adam in us with daily contrition and repentance. That should agonize you daily. If you find yourself not agonizing, repent.

But what did I not say we are agonizing for? We are not agonizing to keep Jesus from being handed over. Likewise, we are not agonizing for the victory of Christ's Kingdom. You see, that was Jesus's point. If His Kingdom was of this world, all these servants would have risen up and they would have fought the accusers, they would have fought the counsel that sought to send Jesus to Pilate, they would have fought Pilate and Herod. They would have fought all of these people and groups, and they would

have won. If Jesus's Kingdom was an earthly Kingdom, it would have worked just like what we think Kingdom's should work like. There would have been a display of power, an overcoming of enemies by force. There would have been a destruction in sheer force of will.

But what was there? There was love. There was the love of this King hiding His power, hiding His strength, and suffering for those servants. And what did He suffer? He suffered judgment. He suffered the ridiculing judgment of sinful people who had no concept of how to respond to God's holiness—just like we don't. And ultimately He suffered the holy judgment of the righteous and holy God against sin. Yes this lowly King played a role reversal with His people.

In earthly kingdoms, the king sends his servants into battle for him. But in this Kingdom not of this world, the Eternal King entered into the land of the enemy, and He fought for those servants. The King entered into the battle and won the victory singlehandedly. He was crucified, died, and was buried. And on the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures. And He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose Kingdom will have no end.

So do you see it? This Kingdom is not of this world. No, it is the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of the King who comes and fights, agonizes for His servants, His under-rowers. This is something unique isn't it? All the more when we consider this Kingdom, something I was reflecting upon this week is how when this King comes judging at the end, that judgment means salvation for His people.

I say that I was reflecting on this this week because we see this in conjunction with our Old Testament lesson. Now, as we look at that lesson in Daniel, we see Jesus described as the Ancient of Days. We see this Ancient of Days given a dominion that never ends, a "kingdom that shall not be destroyed." But what I was reflecting on was how we saw this in the book of Daniel before this.

You see, if you remember the book of Daniel, you'll remember some of the stories in there. There are these stories of God's people under the rule of the enemies, under the Babylonian Empire. But then you see how God brings His judgment and saves His people. You might remember two stories especially from that book: the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown into the fire and the story of Daniel himself and the lion's den. Those both show a glimpse of this eternal kingdom of Jesus.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego finds these three men, servants of the true God, being cast into the hot fire as punishment for their faithfulness to God. And as their thrown in that fire, they are protected by one who appears as a “son of the gods.” Jesus is there protecting His people. And as they were protected, there was judgment against those who were Jesus’ enemies. Literally, the men who cast these three faithful ones into the fire, they were consumed instead of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Additionally, when all was said and done, and the three were okay, the King Nebuchadnezzar sent out a decree punishing anyone who spoke out against their God, ordering the judgment that those speaking against the Lord be torn limb from limb and their houses laid ruins.

Then there is the story of Daniel. Daniel is arrested for His faithful worship, and thrown into the lion’s den. In the end Daniel is spared with the help of the Angel of the Lord—how we see Jesus appearing often in the Old Testament—and the men who set Daniel up for this are devoured by the lions with their families, “before they reached the bottom of the den.” In both of these cases there is salvation for God’s people—salvation where He came and protected them, fought for His servants. And in these cases that salvation was in conjunction with the judgment of the enemies of God.

You see, Christians, this is what Jesus’s heavenly Kingdom means, what it means that His Kingdom is not of this world. It means that in this Kingdom, we see the King reversing roles and fighting, agonizing for His people, His servants, His under-rowers. And as He does that, He brings salvation for them through the judgment of His enemies. As we celebrate Christ as our King this Sunday, then, understand that this is what He has done for you. As you have been made His own in baptism, He then has fought, agonized even to death on the cross for you. And in the victory of His resurrection, you have the promise that your sin is judged on the cross, and His return in judgment to bring His kingdom on the last day means not fear for you, but salvation. Salvation from your enemies of sin, of death, and from the devil Himself.

Yes Jesus’s Kingdom is not of this world. No, instead this King has fought and agonized for you, bringing you an eternal salvation for the eternal Kingdom. Thanks be to our King Jesus. Amen.