

Sunday, November 25, 2012: John 18:33-37

by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue

It is the Feast of Christ the King, the final Sunday of the church's liturgical year. All of today's passages reflect on kingships—those of David, God and Jesus. Although Christians in America are far removed from any direct experience of a king, these passages can teach us about our own political life.

Whether Americans are pleased or in mourning over the results of the presidential election, I suspect that very few of us think that our politicians are characterized by a commitment to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Whatever a politician's party affiliation, our media- and money-driven method of campaigning for national office invites politicians to use partial truth in the service of gaining or retaining power. We should not assume that politicians are opposed to the truth; it is simply too easy to make the truth instrumental to something else.

I believe that this attitude is present in Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?" Of course, it's possible to see the question as the genuine intellectual inquiry of someone longing to know what is really true. It seems more likely, however, that this imperial representative listened to this obscure Jew's commitment to understanding his kingship in terms of truth and found that commitment quaint, naive and largely harmless. From Pilate's perspective, Jesus' views held little threat for Rome.

Nevertheless, in this Gospel reading Jesus does speak of himself as a king—and as a king with a specific mission. He has come into the world to testify to the truth. The truth is not instrumental to some other political purpose. It does not serve to support Jesus' power or authority. Instead it is the decisive identity marker of Jesus and his followers. They are "of the truth" rather than "of the world." Jesus already made this point in his prayer for his followers in John 17, when he mentioned that they do not belong to the world, just as he does not belong to the world. Jesus then asked the Father to "sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

If it is not clear to Pilate, however, it should be clear to those reading John that this is a very different version of politics. It is a kingdom based on truth that can make the citizens of this kingdom holy. If the idea of a king whose mission is to bear witness to

the truth seems hopelessly naive, then a kingdom whose purpose is to make its citizens holy may seem scary, dangerous and cultlike. Even if we are not repelled by the notion of a kingdom directed toward holiness, we are wise to be wary of the notion. Both inside and outside the church we are quick to detect and reject forms of self-acquired holiness as nothing more than superficial acts of piety that often disguise aspects of our lives that are distinctly unholy.

Yet even as we're wary of false holiness, we must also recognize that holiness is one of God's deepest desires for us. This is a function of God's desire for the type of unbroken intimacy that characterized life in the Garden of Eden and that will characterize life in the New Jerusalem. Holiness fits us for friendship with God.

There are many types of friendships, but friendships of the best sort are based on holding important things in common, having a common love and a common goal. God's call to holiness is an invitation to love what and whom God loves.

If we think about holiness in this way, we might find some concrete examples of this in the Sermon on the Mount. In the first verses of Matthew 5 Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes, distinguished by their repeated use of the term *blessed*. These are not direct commands to become poor in spirit or peacemakers; they are declarations about those citizens of the kingdom of God who are highly valued by God. If we are to become holy, to love what and whom God loves, we must love these people too. Loving the peacemakers, for example, may actually help form us as peacemakers.

This is clearly not a politics of those who belong to the world. It is important to remember, however, that in addition to praying that his followers would be sanctified in the truth, Jesus prays that they will not be taken out of the world. Instead he sends them into the world. It could hardly be otherwise. If holiness leads us to love what and whom God loves, and if we are followers of the king who both is himself the truth and bears witness to the truth, then this kingdom must send its citizens out to bear witness to this fact in imitation of its king.