

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 Christ the King 11/22/09 Pastor Bill Uetricht

A portion of the song “Show me the Way” by Styx was played.

Those of you who are fans of old time rock and roll will remember that song. Styx somewhat poignantly prays: “Show me the way. Show me the way. Take me to the river and wash all my illusions away.” The problem according to Styx’ lead singer is that he is confused as “the saints turn into sinners.” He says, “All the heroes and legends [he] knew as a child have fallen to idols of clay.”

I couldn’t help but think of this song as I dealt with the texts for this weekend, Christ the King weekend. All of the texts seem to want to strip illusions away. All of them deal with political realities in which power has been or is being asserted. All of them highlight political big wigs, legends, who **seem** to be important, **seem** to be in control, **seem** to be the possessors of truth. And all of these texts desire to strip away these illusions of what seems to be true. And in the process they depict all of the legends as “idols of clay.”

In the reading from Daniel we are given this massive picture of God: an Ancient One who is on his throne. This Ancient One has clothing as white as snow and his hair is the color of the finest wool. God, in other words, is not only ancient, he is pure. His throne is surrounded by fiery flames. The wheels of this throne also are burning. This is the God whose purity can scorch, can refine. Before this God are a thousand thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand people who are serving and attending to him. This is the massive God of the faithful, the massive God of the world.

Now to understand the impact of this image you really need to know what Daniel is contrasting this God with, something that we discover in the verses that are left out. In the verses that are deleted

we are told of a little horn that has been arrogant. This is a reference to a nasty leader who persecuted the Jews during the Greek occupation of Israel during the middle part of the second century before Christ. This leader, a man named Antiochus Epiphanes, did the most horrible thing, at least in the eyes of faithful Jews. He had a pig, **the** unclean animal of Judaism, sacrificed on the altar in the temple in Jerusalem. This was a gutsy guy, a mean guy who posed a great threat to faithful Jews, such a great threat that some were ready to throw in the towel on their faith. The Book of Daniel is written in the midst of all of this to encourage the faithful not to give up. Be reminded, they are being told, of the Ancient of Days. Antiochus is a little speck in the flow of history. He lives with a lot of illusions about how important he is, but he, in light of the Ancient One, isn't very important after all. He is an idol of clay. Daniel wants to strip away the illusions that Antiochus is operating with and that the Jews are being tempted to believe. They themselves are being tempted to believe that Antiochus is really in charge.

The same kind of message is being articulated in our second lesson from Revelation. This time the oppressive force is the Roman Empire. Oh boy, do they take themselves seriously! They make themselves legends and heroes. And sadly, the early church was tempted to believe the illusions that the Romans had. Maybe, just maybe, since they are in charge we ought to live in a way that lets them be in charge. Maybe we ought to throw in the towel on our faith. No, Revelation is urging its readers. Remember the one who is and who was and who is to come. Remember the one who has been around forever, the one who is still present, the one who is yet to come to do something quite remarkable. Remember Jesus Christ, the faithful martyr, the one who was the first to be raised from the dead.

Remember that this One is in charge. He's coming, and he will bring justice. Those Roman leaders—they live in illusion land. The illusions need to be stripped away.

And then we have this little dialogue between Jesus and Pilate in our gospel lesson. Pilate is a big wig, a really big wig. History books tell us that he was an evil big wig. He's the one who is in charge in the story from John. Or is he? I wonder as you hear or as you have heard the Jesus and Pilate story, whom you think is the more anxious one? There's no doubt. Pilate is the more anxious one. The one who is in charge--or appears to be--is the one who is most fearful. Jesus, the one who could be the victim of Pilate, the other Romans, and the Jewish leaders, seems not at all anxious. Who's really in charge here? The illusions are being stripped away.

One of the reasons that I have been thinking about illusions lately has to do with something I read not too long ago during my devotion time. That something was a provocative paragraph by Parker Palmer:

There is the experience we commonly call disillusionment, when a trusted friend lets us down, an institution we had relied on fails us, or worst of all, when we discover ourselves to be less than we had thought. Many of us try hard to avoid such experiences, and when we are in the midst of them we go through a kind of dying. But the very name we give these moments tells us that something positive is happening through our pain. We say we are being disillusioned. That is, we are being stripped of some illusions about life, about others, about ourselves. As our illusions are removed, like barriers on a road, we have a chance to take that road farther toward truth. Instead of commiserating and offering a shoulder to cry on when a friend says that he or she is disillusioned, we ought to congratulate, celebrate, and ask a friend how we can help the process go deeper still.

I am aware that one of my defects as a parent has been my tendency to try to keep my children from being disillusioned. I've worked too hard to make sure that they would not get disappointed by life and people. Maybe sometimes being disillusioned is the first step toward new life, toward the discovery of truth. Maybe sometimes we have to become dis-illusioned to discover what is really real, who really is in charge.

Let's be honest. It is not just Antiochus Epiphanes, the Roman Empire, or Pontius Pilate, the struggling Jews, or the early church who operated out of illusion. Illusion is often the world we all live in. Life is ours to engineer, we believe falsely. And so we grasp for control. If it is up to us then we must control people, situations, the church, the family, the school. Control comes out of illusion. "It's all up to me!" And illusion so often comes out of fear. Life will fall apart if it is not controlled by me. I am sure that Antiochus Epiphanes and the Roman Empire imposed control out of fear. Things will fall apart if we don't keep these Jews under control and if we don't get rid of this threatening King of the Jews, Jesus. Fear drives the need for control. Control comes out of illusion.

Christ the King weekend is a reminder of what the truth is. Antiochus is not in control. The Romans are not in control. Pilate is not in control. We are not in control. You are not in control. Jesus, the faithful witness, the one who was crucified, the lamb that was slain—he is in charge. He is the king of the rulers of the earth. He is the one whom God raised from the dead.

And if the lamb that was slain, the one who was crucified is the one whom God raised from the dead then life looks very different. The one who is in charge, who is the king, is not some idol of clay, some

loud, bossy, controlling big wig who rules with a hand of violence, but a gentle lamb who rules by letting go, who rules out of compassion and love. People, it is love that is in charge.

It is love that wants to take us to the river and wash all of our illusions away, as Styx says. It is love that takes us to the waters of our baptism and drowns our self-preoccupied, control-needy selves and brings us forth into truth and new life, life in which we can let go, give up control, relax, love.

Show me the way, o God! Take me to the river tonight and every night and wash my illusions away!