

Homily for the Feast of Christ the King (C)  
St. Joseph's Neier                      November 23-24, 2013  
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: True rulers are willing to sacrifice and do not always have power and control in the forefront of their actions.

*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."  
He replied to him,  
"Amen, I say to you,  
today you will be with me in Paradise."*

It was his granddaughter that scared me the most.

Unless you have been in a cave this weekend, you may have heard about the opening of the new Hunger Games movie, *Catching Fire*. Your beloved pastor, ever on the cutting edge, has already seen the film. To be honest, it follows the book which I read two years ago, fairly well, so I would advise going to see the film first, because there are some big surprises in it that were not all that surprising for those of us who know where this is all going.

Nevertheless, one of the more memorable characters in the series is the President of the fictional land of Panem, President Snow. Without getting into too much plot and detail, let me just say that he is the bad guy. His government is dictatorial (forcing young people to fight to the death in a yearly ritual), greedy (people in the capital of Panem have it great while the outer districts suffer) and vindictive (the heroine is forced to play the Hunger Games again). The latest movie ramps up the violence of the government a bit as they try to crack down on dissent and possible revolution.

But Snow is a fascinating character because he is not simply all evil. He has a granddaughter which he has much affection for. He promises Katniss, the heroine, that he will never lie to her, and all throughout the series, he makes good on that promise. And finally, he honestly believes that the Hunger Games and his jack-booted rule and designed to keep the country at peace, to keep from millions of people dying. And there is no reason for Katniss or the reader to believe that he isn't making good on his promise and telling us the truth.

But the truth can be troublesome. For although he may have convinced himself that he is doing all of this for the right reasons, he is really just keeping power for himself. He may have cared about the people of Panem at one time, but now he is simply trying to keep the power, keep control, keep rule to perpetuate his own voracity, his own avarice, his own desire. This is the REAL Hunger Games, the lust for power and the need to seize it and hold on to it, no matter the cost.

I have been doing a lot of thinking lately about power, leadership and control. I think what happened to President Snow is both a common story of many who aspire to rule as well as a cautionary tale of how one can lose their soul in the attainment of power, no matter how noble one's intentions originally were.

This is a very scary thing. It is simple enough to think that Snow is just purely evil and we have nothing in common with him. But we know that this is not the case. Anyone, and I do mean anyone, who aspires to any position of power can twist the mandate with which they have been charged. They can use their power for their own benefit, their own greed or worse. They can use immoral means to try to keep a stranglehold on control of that power. Snow is a tyrant. But Snow is also a grandpa, a very loving and caring grandpa. He is far from the monster we think he is. And that's the most terrifying thing of all.

In our gospel today, we see a scene that is somewhat jarring, especially as we ramp up towards Christmas, Jesus dying on a cross. It is a strange gospel in light of the feast that we celebrate this weekend, Christ the King. And yet, we know, because we read the book before, that Jesus is King, he is ruler, precisely because he was willing to sacrifice himself, he was willing to give his all. He is unlike any ruler, any leader we have ever seen before. His Kingdom and his power come not from armies, not from jack-booted rule, not from manipulation or the bread and circuses of the Hunger Games. His rule comes from love, from selflessness, from giving, giving to the depths of his being.

All of us, to a certain extent, have been granted a certain amount of power, control and rule in our lives. We are parents, bosses, supervisors, board members and for me, pastor. As we wield power and authority, it would behoove us to look deeply at how we do that, why we do that and what we can do better in those roles. If it is just about ourselves and our needs, our bank accounts, we are treading on some dangerous paths. The questions we need to ask ourselves are: Who am I serving? Why do I do what I do? Is this for others or do I simply keep my own needs in mind? No doubt there is a bit of self-interest that we are allowed, but how much and where are its limits?

This is not an easy thing. This is not a simple task. It led Jesus up the hill to Calvary to suffer and die.

And if think you cannot be corrupted, that you are not that kind of person, that kind of leader, remember, even President Snow has a granddaughter.