
Christ Our King""The Experiment

[Click here for the podcast](#)

The Rev. Thee Smith
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
November 22, 2009
John 18:33-37

Invocation: In the name of God "our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen.
(The Hymnal No.388, "O Worship the King," v.5)

Here's an easy riddle for you. "What are the three best things about teaching?" You've probably heard this one before. If not, you could figure-out the answer almost before I say it. The three best things about teaching are: June""July""and August!

Now you know what's on my mind. It's almost December, and I'm a college professor, and all of us on academic campuses are getting "'tunnel vision' at this time of year. Summer vacation is nowhere close, but we can see a "'light at the end of the tunnel,' and the light is a flashing sign that says, "'Winter Break! Winter Break! Winter Break!"

In this week before Thanksgiving Break we're giddy with anticipation. In fact there are always a few students who push the envelope further by leaving early. They won't show up for classes at all next week but will take two weekends for Thanksgiving by going home last Friday!

That's why about this time every year I'm asked by some students, with a little hope in their voice, "Prof. Smith, are you going to cancel class next week?" And then I find myself in the position of "'spoiling the party' with a disappointing answer: "No, I'll be right here." But I also try to moderate their disappointment; with a playful little smile I try to get them to smile with me when I ask, "And how about you?"

We were all of us disappointed in a different way in my conflict resolution class last week. One of the students was not simply a student that day but was "'micro-teaching' the class. I call it micro-teaching when a student is assigned to conduct the class for a half-hour or so as the instructor. For her micro-teaching session our student-instructor used a famous case study. Or rather she chose that now infamous case study of a college prison experiment. It's the one that can never again be performed in the same way on any college campus, and you may have heard of it for that very reason.

It's the Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted at Stanford University almost forty years ago now, in 1971. The experiment was led by Prof. Philip Zimbardo and accompanied by a team of researchers. This is how our student-instructor described the experiment:

Twenty-four undergraduates were selected out of 70 to play the roles of both guards and prisoners and live in a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Those selected were chosen for their lack of psychological issues, [lack of] crime history, and [lack of] medical disabilities, in order to obtain a representative sample. Roles were assigned based on a coin toss.

[The students quickly] adapted to their roles, stepping beyond the boundaries of what had been predicted and leading to dangerous and psychologically damaging situations. One-third of the guards were judged to have exhibited "genuine" sadistic tendencies, while many prisoners were emotionally traumatized (two of whom had to be removed from the

experiment early).

After being confronted by [his graduate student in psychology] . . . and realizing that he had been passively allowing unethical acts to be performed under his direct supervision, Zimbardo [in his role as prison warden] concluded that both prisoners and guards had become too grossly absorbed in their roles and terminated the experiment [a week early] after six days (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment)

Following that brief introduction our student-instructor proceeded to show us video excerpts of an interview recorded a year or so after the experiment. It's publically available on the internet, if you have the fortitude to view it. This is the interview to which our student-instructor responded when she gave the disappointing answer: "Most likely he would have done the same thing."

She was responding to the interview in which one student confronted another who had been his guard. And this particular student-guard had assumed the authority to mistreat his prisoner; mistreated him, for example, by depriving him of food, depriving him of bathroom privileges, and similar behavior that I will not detail here. And now the two of them were in a room together, in front of a camera, and talking to each other in reasonable terms as part of a research initiative to debrief the experiment a year later.

Here's the exchange that led to our student-instructor's disappointing answer. The former student-prisoner says to his former student-guard:

"[Now] I know what you can turn into . . . I know what you are willing to do."

Then the former guard speaks back to his former prisoner:

"Well, if you were in that position what would you have done?"

And after a moment of genuine reflection the former prisoner replies:

"I don't know." (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUfcZ1SvVuc&NR=1)

"I don't know." That was his considered response. "I don't know." With disarming honesty he admitted that he didn't know whether or not he would have done the same thing to others that his former guard had done to him "if the roles had been reversed and he had been the one in authority, with the power to make life-affecting decisions over others.

And that's when, no longer as a teacher now but emotionally involved as a participant in the class myself, I blurted out this question to our student-instructor, "But what do you think he would have done?" "to which she responded with the disappointing but realistic answer:

"Most likely he would have done the same thing."

"Most likely he would have done the same thing." In fact, that's also what Prof. Zimbardo himself concluded, both then and even more recently. More recently, that is decades later in 2005, Zimbardo testified on behalf of one of our soldiers on trial for his role in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison abuses. You remember the trophy photographs of those Iraqi prisoners abused by our own military at that prison in Iraq in 2004.

"Situational" behavior is what Zimbardo called the abuses in both cases; situational behavior versus "dispositional" behavior. This is behavior, he explains on the internet, that is not due to someone's disposition or to anything inherent in their individual personality. Rather it's the situation itself that conditions them to behave the way they do. And such situations, by implication, could affect any of us in similar ways, and result in similar actions by any of us.

That's why I've been haunted by my student's answer to the question all week. Because in the very moment she said it the rest of us in the class understood that the comment could also be extended to any of us. Not just, "Most likely he would have done the same thing," but also:

"'Most likely, we would have done the same thing.' And that is a very disappointing prospect, isn't it?"

Now, maybe you say, "I don't buy it!" Fair enough. I'm also aware that we Christians in particular have to watch-out for free-floating (non-specific) guilt-in-general. But whether or not any of this is true, or whether any of us believe that it's true, we can at least agree on the following. [Smile.] We can agree that none of us want to be subjects in one of Prof. Zimbardo's psychology experiments, right? Yes, we can agree on that much!

But wait a minute! What am I saying? Why am I being so limited here, so minimalist, so secular? Especially today, hearing the scriptures we've read for this Sunday of "Christ the King," how could I speak only in human terms about our "situational behaviors?" Do we not have better prospects "I mean more divine resources" for manifesting in our own behavior the love of Christ, no matter what the situation, past, present, or future?

What about that invocation we heard from the Book of Revelation? Do we really believe that there is bestowed on us Christians this grace, and this peace:

Grace . . . and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come . . .

from Jesus Christ . . . the ruler of the kings of the earth . . . who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father" (Rev. 1.4-6)?

Now, Christian friends, I grant you: it may require a considerable gift of faith to believe that we here today have been "made to be a kingdom, freed from our sins by the death of Christ, and thus capable of serving his God and Father as priests in that kingdom." Yes, a considerable gift of faith may be necessary to believe all that. But that is what we are here to receive every Sunday, isn't it? a renewal of faith—the faith to believe in all that we are called to be by our love of Christ, and by our love for this community to which he has called us; called us to be his beloved community in the midst of the world around us.

That's why, I believe, we have this very gospel appointed for today on Christ the King Sunday. It's not the conventional picture of a king wielding absolute authority and power over his subordinates. Rather it is our Lord himself on trial, standing as a subject before a tyrannical authority who has absolute power over him in situational terms—the power of life and death. It's the kind of power, we might say, that a prison guard or a prison warden has over an inmate who is about to be corrected, punished, or worse.

And how does our Lord acquit himself?

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus declares before his "prison warden" in today's gospel.

"If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting [to get me out of here] . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18.36-37).

That's the voice! That's the voice we are endeavoring to hear today. On every Sunday and in every church service, at every weekday Bible study and every prayer meeting, through daily devotion times and in every mediation moment, we are endeavoring to hear that voice, to accommodate ourselves to that voice, to be converted by that voice so that in the situations we find ourselves its truth will prevail.

"And what is truth?" That's the question that Jesus' "prison warden" asks in the very next verse that follows today's gospel (John 18.38). And the compelling answer for us who believe is that truth is a person, the person of our Lord himself—Jesus as the truest human being—who . . .

On the night he was betrayed . . . took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his friends, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me;"

[And who] after supper . . . took the cup of wine, gave thanks, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me." (Book of Common Prayer, p. 371)

And so we are the community called to be disciples of this true human being, and this unconventional King; a King who also presided like a priest over his own offering of himself—offering himself for the sake of others, and who calls us to do the same. In situations of betrayal, mistreatment, vile behavior, or inhumanity between others, we may hear the voice of this Truth and join with him by being truly human and humane ourselves; by offering our own body—our own person, ourselves, as an intervention—in memory of him.

Or in situations of power, authority, influence, privilege, status, and entitlement, we may hear that same voice of Truth inviting us to join him in the way of Truth and be truly human and humane ourselves; by offering our own life substance, our life-giving energy as life-blood, and as an empowerment for others—in memory of him.

In that way, Christian friends, may we experience the reality of our faith in a way that does not disappoint, and the reality of that kingdom announced in today's opening prayer, the Collect appointed for this feast of Christ the King.

Almighty God . . . whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings . . . Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule.

"Under his most gracious rule!" That's the situation we may presuppose, according to our faith, for a very different kind of experiment—a "Christ the King" kind of experiment, and a "priesthood of all believers" kind of experiment. Let us give

thanks that we are not unfortunate subjects in somebody else's misconceived psychology experiment. Rather we are his friends, serving "under His most gracious rule," and in the power of that conviction we have available to us the resources to be the beloved community we are called to be. Thanks be to God!

Comments? Contact The Rev. Thee Smith at: TSmith@stphilipscathedral.org

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*