Kingdoms in Conflict

Blake Allan is a 24-year-old research assistant from Vancouver. He was raised in a dogmatic protestant sect but now calls himself an “atheist-humanist.”

“I don’t believe in metaphysical things; I believe in scientific proof,” says Allan, who began questioning his religion at age 15. (1)

As a professed atheist, Blake Allen is not yet among the majority of Canadians, but neither is he alone in his views. In April of this year, a survey done by Canwest News Service and Global National found that overall the nationwide proportion of people who believe in God has dropped from 84 percent in 2000 to 71 percent in 2009. According to pollster Ipsos Reid, the biggest decline was among men like Blake Allan, which went from 86 percent to 63 percent. (2)

The poll results were not a surprise. In 2008 a Harris Decima survey found that only 72 percent of Canadians said they believed in God. Among men the percentage was 67 percent. And while 82% of Canadians over the age of 50 said they believed in God, more than one in three – 36% – of those under the age of 25 said they did not believe in God. (3)

If there was any doubt about the pervasive influence of radical secularism in Canadian society, these two surveys put the issue to rest. Mainline Protestants make up only 20 percent of the Canadian public (7 percent of whom say they are Anglican), which is a sharp decrease from when mainline Protestants formed half the population in the 1930s. (4)

If you as a Christian feel uneasy about the present state of society, you are not alone. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas says that Christians must now learn to live as “resident aliens” – being in the world but not of it.

This is nothing new. Jesus warned of this predicament in John’s Gospel on the night before he died. In the 5th century St. Augustine posited the two kingdoms – the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. Each kingdom has its own legitimacy, but what happens when they are in conflict?

Our story from Mark’s Gospel concerns a man caught in a conflict. He is John the Baptist who “appeared baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk. 1:4). John was drawing quite a crowd with his message of repentance, but he probably would have been ignored by Herod had he not condemned him for marrying his brother’s wife – something prohibited in Book of Leviticus (see Lev. 18:16; 20:21).

John was a blunt preacher, at a time when what you said could get you killed. So it is no surprise that John had enemies, his worst enemy being Herodias, the wife of Herod. After all, if Herod acted on what John said, Herodias would be out on the street without power or support, or even worse, she might be killed. We can understand why she hated him.

And yet Herod, who had John imprisoned, did not want to put him to death. In fact, he liked to listen to him, though what John said made him uneasy. So John lingered in prison indefinitely.

Finally, Herodias got her chance at revenge. It was Herod’s birthday and he gave a party in his honor, inviting all his court officials, army officers, and the leading citizens of Galilee. As part of the festivities Herodias’ daughter Salome, Herod’s stepdaughter, came in and danced for the men. It must have been sensational, because Herod turns to her and says, “Ask me for anything you like, even half of my kingdom, and I will give it to you!”

Salome went out and consulted her mother, who told her, “Ask for John the Baptist’s head!” So Salome hurried back to the king and told him, “I want the head of John the Baptist – right now – on a tray!”
The king regretted his impetuous promise, but he was embarrassed to go back on his word in front of his guests. So he sent one of his bodyguards to the prison to cut off John’s head and bring it to him. And the soldier did just that. And the head of John the Baptist was brought to Salome on a tray and she took it to her mother.

So here we have the death of an innocent man who died because of a stupid promise made to an erotic dancer at a silly party where most of the guests were drunk. Such is life.

“Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God,” says the author of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus knew it was only a matter of time before conflict would come between men and women who followed him and those in positions of authority. Intense commitment always brings conflict: ethical dilemmas; moral compromises; spiritual surrender. The truth is: if you are serious about the Christian life, you are going to encounter conflict – the inevitable clash of values that occur between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

There are basically three kinds of conflict that come to all of us. Some conflicts are internal. They are conflicts that take place in our own mind and heart. Should I do this or should I do that? Should I do the right thing or should I do the expedient thing? We’ve all been there. If only life were simpler. If only there was one side to every issue – if we didn’t have to make choices – if we didn’t have to decide.

John the Baptist chose to tell the truth rather than save his life. Herod chose to let an innocent man die rather than retract his foolish promise. Sooner or later, we all have to choose and take our stand. When the choice is between that which we know to be good and that which we know to be evil, we had better choose rightly. There is a terrible price to be paid when we choose wrongly.

I think of my divinity school classmate Dennis Drainville who is now the Bishop of Quebec. In his younger days Dennis was elected to the Ontario provincial parliament in the Bob Rae landslide. He was a loyal member of the NDP until the government decided to legalize gambling. Dennis, in conscience, could not support that move. He was told that if he did not support the government on gambling, he would be kicked out of the party. Dennis resigned from parliament rather than act against his conscience. His political career was over.

Yes, sometimes doing the right thing can cost you dearly.

The second kind of conflict is external. This is the conflict between others and ourselves when we stand up for God’s kingdom and God’s values over every other kingdom and all other values. The church talks a lot these days about discipleship. Please note: being a disciple of Jesus is not about a trip to Disneyland. It’s a matter of life and death. The reality is stark. The struggle is intense. The stakes are high. The shadow of the cross looms large in the background. John the Baptist was not beheaded because he went along with the status quo. John gave his life because of his commitment to truth, as he understood it.

Listen to the words of a sermon like the one that many of us could have heard in our churches last Sunday: In the gospel of Christ... one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us... The experience of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for this earth... May we give ourselves like Christ, not for self, but to give justice and peace to our people.

Pretty innocuous, you may think. It’s just a sermon; just the church going about the business of preaching the gospel. The only thing is I left out part of it. The part I left out is that right after the preacher said, “May we give ourselves like Christ, not for self, but to give justice and peace to our people,” a shot rang out in the sanctuary and the preacher, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, was dead.

You see, when Christians act like Christians, the world starts acting like the world. No more Mr. Nice Guy. In fact, the world will crucify you if you get too out of line. Sometimes being a Christian is a very dangerous thing. It can even cost your life.
There are internal conflicts and external conflicts. Both of these grow out of a third form of conflict – and that is spiritual conflict. Nothing can spare us from the evil intent of the Herods of the world. But the good news is that we can’t keep Jesus in the tomb. He just won’t stay dead and buried, no matter how hard the world tries to keep him there. So take heart that, when all is said and done, all the Herods of the world will say, “Somebody has been raised from the dead. The power we thought was dead and buried is loose again in the world.”

Dr. Tom Long tells a story about a church leader who was resisting oppression in South Korea. He had just been released from prison where he had served a two-year term as a political prisoner. What was his crime? Preaching and teaching the kingdom of God.

This leader said that the conditions in the prison were so grim that he began to lose hope. Day after day, he found his faith ebbing away. He stopped studying the Bible, he stopped praying, and he stopped hoping and believing. Every few weeks the government would march him back into a courtroom to give him the opportunity to renounce his political and theological views. Finally, after months of deprivation, he had decided to give in – to recant.

When they brought him into court, he was surprised to see his wife and several members of his church sitting in the gallery. He had not seen his wife for months, and the tears welled up in his eyes. The judge told him to stand up and called on him to renounce his “traitorous” views. He stood weary, ready to recant, when suddenly he heard his wife and his Christian friends saying with one voice, “God is alive! God is alive!”

It was all they were able to say, for quickly they were removed from the court. But it was enough. He sat down without betraying his faith, and renewed in his confidence that God is, indeed, alive. (5)

I wonder what kind of conflict you are experiencing right now. Perhaps you’re experiencing internal conflict. You are being asked to do something you know is against your values. The stakes are high. Perhaps you’re experiencing external conflict with someone who is opposing you, hurting you, and perhaps even persecuting you.

What I hope, though, is that you are in spiritual conflict. I hope that whatever may be testing your faith, you know the presence and power of Jesus Christ in your life. Jesus is risen from the dead… and God is alive! Remember that the next time you start to lose hope. The kingdoms of this world will all fade away, nations will rise and wane, but God is alive! God is alive – yesterday, today and forever. Amen. (6)

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July 12, 2009
Text – Mark 6:14-29
Proper 10/15, B

1. “Fewer men believe in God” by Misty Harris, CanWest News Service, April 9, 2009 at canada.com
2. Ibid.
5. “When the Church is the Church” in Pulpit Resource, July 16, 2000, 13.