

“What is Truth?”

Christ the King Sunday - November 21, 2021 - John 18:33-37/B

What in the world is going on? Copenhagen and Covid. Rittenhouse and Arbery. Infrastructure and Build Back Better. These are the issues swirling around us at the end of our church year, as we mark the festival of The Reign of Christ, or Christ the King. Though it might sometimes feel like a world turned upside down by violence and fear, I boldly proclaim to you today, “Grace and peace from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Amen.

What a week it has been for armchair quarterbacks, political pundits and legal observers: regardless which of these arenas you choose, one thing is sure: everyone has an opinion. We like to say that *everyone is entitled to their opinion*, so you can feel free to state your case regarding the coaching of the teams you follow, how Congress is behaving and what they are doing, climate change or the dispensation of justice through the processes of our legal system. We all have opinions - right or wrong, informed or from our guts - and because of that, part of who we are is often on high alert these days.

Here we stand, in a very long line of humans who are ready to wield whatever power we possess, so that **we** can control the conversation. So it ever has been, and apparently always will be. Even 2,000 years ago the struggle for power and control was going on as those with immense power and those who only held power in the midst of a crowd, tried to convince one another of their preferred agenda. Case in point, Pontius Pilate has taken the stage again today. You’ll remember him as Rome’s representative. We visit him every year during Holy Week, but we Lutherans were just there *again* less than a month ago - for Reformation Sunday. Then, the verse that I added to today’s reading, “*What is Truth?*” was the climax of the conversation between Pilate, emissary of Rome’s son of the gods and Jesus, the Son of God. But what we focus on today is not defining truth - it is the never-ending struggle between two different worlds - a battle of wits and different ways of life - a duel to discern who is the real King in this conversation between two powers. Their encounter echoes through history until it lands on our doorstep - an illustration of the conflict when one lives in two worlds; in two kingdoms.

When Jesus was brought to Pilate, he was less than a day away from dying. Even so, Jesus did not resist. One of our liturgies states it was, surprisingly, “a death he freely accepted.” But curiously, Pilate was extremely reluctant to condemn him. When he asks the crowd what charges they were bringing, they basically said, *Trust us...if he weren’t a bad man we wouldn’t have brought him to you*. He tries to return Jesus to them for their justice, but they are seeking the death penalty, which only Rome could provide. Pilate asks Jesus if he is, indeed, the King of the Jews and Jesus responds, *“Is this your question, or have you judged me on what others have told you?”* Now, you might be wondering, who is really in charge here? Is it Jesus, or Pilate or the crowd outside trying to force their agenda? Finally, Pilate asks directly, *“what have you done?”* for he is the judge of a man brought without charges.

“My kingdom is not from this world; my kingdom is not from here...” Though frustrated, Pilate hears language he is comfortable with, *“So, you ARE a king?”* **“You say that I am a king. 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.” The power in the room seems to slither like a serpent**

- unable to be caught or cornered. But perhaps Pilate, without knowing, has already been captured. For on that day, Pilate came face to face with Truth in his own life.

One of the early church fathers who interpreted much of scripture for the fledgling Christian community, offers the intriguing idea that Pilate became a witness to Truth that day - the truth that Jesus was who he said he was - the king of the Jews. That title, according to St. Augustine, was "*inscribed in Pilate's heart, as it was on the titulus*" the sign that described the charge of one being crucified. Over Jesus' head on the cross on which he died, Pilate insisted on the wording of this charge, and had it posted in three languages: Hebrew for the Jews, Greek for the wise among the Gentiles, and Latin for the Romans who were exercising control over most of the known world. We all know what it said: "**Jesus of Nazareth. The King of the Jews.**"

So why does this story of Pilate wrangling with Jesus over who he is and what he's done, belong here at the end of our Church Year? Simple. It is here before we start another liturgical cycle of seasons to remind us of our Truth - that Jesus was the Christ, the One who revealed God to us, the one who reigns over a kingdom that is completely different from the world in which we live. It stands as a New Year's resolution (as it were) that even though God's way is not our way, **we have been chosen** to live God's way in a world that is increasingly indifferent to any way other than the way of the world.

The difference about the Kingdom of God is the reign of a ruler who is completely different from how this world measures success and power. Try to imagine any world leader in human history who didn't count gain, but measured by loss. A king who **suffers**, weeping over Jerusalem and his dead friend, Lazarus; who shows **mercy**, and is "moved to compassion"; who **Loves** enough to be a sacrifice for those he loves; who **dwells with us**, incarnate, enfleshed in our flesh; and who **companions us** through all the days of our lives. We confess our loyalty to this, yet we live in the other.

There is great struggle in being a Christian in our world especially in these times, because it means *following* Jesus. His first disciples proclaimed that God was *up to* something new - not a new doctrine, not a new faith, not a new God, but a new way of living with God and with neighbor. That way of living was not based on the Law. It was not based on "Fair." It was not based on "Mine." It was rooted in something much more true, and much more difficult to achieve: Forgiveness. Love. Sacrifice. Justice. Truth. Mercy. Grace. Those are big words for little human people...words that people discuss and question and understand differently, all the while trying to convince each other to get back on the world's culture train, and just enjoy the ride.

But Jesus' ministry was meant to be counter-cultural, and succeeded, because "*the birthpangs of a new age*" were just beginning for Jesus and his followers. 2,000 years ago, the Lordship of Jesus challenged the lordship of the Roman Empire, the most powerful political and military structure in history, but who does it challenge now? What is the faithful truth in your life that would endanger you if you spoke it? Think about the responses you might get if you publicly and emphatically stated, for example, "We are consuming too much." Or, "Money isn't as important as you think." Or even, "Control does not provide security." All these concepts come from Jesus, the truth teller. Or what about, "We are not as special as we think..." Not saint or sinner, but both at once. Truth.

So, we do not gather here to get a weekly "pep talk," to provide morality lessons for our children, nor to have at least one hour a week to relax...we are here to **worship** our

King: to **rejoice together** in the beauty of song; to **give thanks** with our hearts and our tithes and offerings; to **learn** about God through Scripture and preaching; to **be forgiven and freed** from our selves and to be **nourished and sustained** in our faith. Only a God who has been with us - who has *been* us - can truly rule over us and capture our hearts. God is part of our Story; and we are part of God's - in our worship, in our statements of faith, in hearing the Word and sharing the Lord's Supper.

As we learn to live in two worlds at the same time, we often have to choose where our ultimate allegiance lies as "we live *in the* world but are not *of* the world." It has been said that the idea "*of the Christian God is ridiculous (because it's) not about the most powerful or empire-destroying king, but a God who gathers and sends...*" A God who knows our inmost being - and still loves us better than we love ourselves. The Kingdom of our God, and of his Christ, is not somewhere else...The Kingdom of God is here where we live; and where Jesus (God with us) is our Truth. May no one every be able to convince you otherwise. Amen.

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Resources: *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Elowsky 2007