

Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King
Christ and Grace
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John 18:33-37
November 25, 2018

It's the Last Sunday after Pentecost, also known as Christ the King Sunday, when we acknowledge Jesus the Christ as our king, the all powerful ruler of heaven and earth. In our gospel for today Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate on charges of sedition; that is, stirring up a rebellion against the government. Jesus is accused of being a dangerous revolutionary and a threat to the king. This event takes place in the Roman headquarters just before the Passover celebration. The accusing Jewish authorities remain outside of the headquarters to avoid defilement, which would prevent them from celebrating the Passover. We don't hear the whole story this morning but as Pilate interrogates Jesus, he is reduced to running back and forth seven times between Jesus inside and the authorities outside as he tries to make sense of the charges.

Acting on behalf of the emperor, Pilate had a hard time taking Jesus seriously. What threat could this ragged, sandaled man be to Caesar's kingdom? A king in those days was the most powerful man on earth. The king ruled autocratically, dictated orders, and demanded obedience. Being a king meant being in control – having all the power. Jesus stood before Pilate, with no fancy robes, no mighty army and no credentials; he was an itinerant teacher, not even an official rabbi, and he didn't own even a place to lay his head. Pilate asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" as if to say, "Are you serious?" Because there was nothing in Jesus' appearance or behavior to suggest that he had any power.

He certainly didn't look like a king. His power was not political. His power was not used to control, to fight, or to persecute. That is worldly use of power. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world." Pontius Pilate was the one with the power. He was a governor and if he needed to he could call the Roman legions to subdue this Jesus. Yet somehow Pilate recognized the power in Jesus. Something about this man was different. But Pilate really needed to quiet this disturbance before the higher authorities caught wind of it, and so he had to make a decision. Was this Jesus a King or not?

How are we like Pontius Pilate in our lives today, scurrying back and forth between the world and Jesus, trying to decide? Who or what rules our lives? Where do we spend our time – serving ourselves or serving others? Where do we spend our money – on ourselves or on others? Jesus said, "I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Do we choose the world's definition of a king, or do we choose the king, and the truth, that we see in Jesus?

In the very next verse after our reading today, Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" And isn't that the question we all have? We spend our lives searching for truth, for the meaning of life. We study history, science, philosophy, mathematics, and great literature, hoping to find it. We observe life, engage in discussions, and take in news accounts from Fox News to CNN to NPR, hoping someone has the truth to tell us. But then when we think we have found it, it shifts again, or perhaps more disturbingly, it hits home.

The truth can be threatening. It shines a light on sin. It demands justice. It cannot be swept under the rug. Obviously Jesus was seen as a threat and was brought before the Roman government in an attempt to eliminate that threat. The truth is a fearful thing to those who live in lies. What were the Jewish leaders afraid of? They couldn't put a finger on it exactly, but they sensed the truth in this supposed king – the truth of a different kind of power.

Jesus used his power to serve others; he used it to forgive, to heal, and to feed others. This power washed the disciples' feet and forgave the sins of outcast women. This power caused the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to be raised. This power turned water into wine and multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed five thousand! Yes, it was a different kind of power. It was the power of love.

Even so, the Jewish authorities and Pontius Pilate were unable to testify to the truth. They did not belong to the truth. They would not listen to Jesus' voice. To belong to the truth is to recognize in Jesus the truth of God, to hear the words of God in the voice of Jesus.

His voice resonates all around us – do we hear his voice? Are we listening when the news tells of starving children in Yemen? Do we ever wonder if Jesus might be traveling with the millions of homeless refugees around the world who desperately long for safety? Are we listening when Jesus asks us to turn the other cheek, to love not only our neighbors, but also our enemies, and to welcome the stranger?

Pilate was given an opportunity to make a decision about Jesus. Each of us is given that same opportunity. We can choose to name Jesus as our king. His rule is over heaven and earth and his power changes lives. It is not a power of fear; it is the power of love. It is not the power of oppression; it is power that brings freedom. It is not a power of lies and exaggerations; it is the power that will speak the good news into our lives.

Next Sunday we begin the season of Advent. It is a time of waiting, hope, and expectation. It is a time when we are invited to prepare our hearts to receive the gift of truth and love. This great gift is coming into our midst, coming to reign in our hearts. Pilate could not receive the gift. Will we?

Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king; born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.¹

Amen.

¹ Charles Wesley, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus" Hymnal 1982, hymn 66.