

A Decision About Jesus

A Sermon for the Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King

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*Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "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."
John 18:33-37*

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, and it's also known as Christ the King Sunday, when we acknowledge Jesus the Christ as our king, the ruler of heaven and earth. The Gospel tells us how Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate on charges of sedition; that is, stirring up a rebellion against the government, the powers that be. Jesus is accused of being a dangerous revolutionary and a threat to the earthly King Herod, a threat to the status quo. 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. I am struck by how similar this all sounds to the current back and forth in our own government.

Pilate had a hard time taking Jesus seriously. What threat could this ragged, sandaled man be to Caesar's kingdom? 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. 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 slander, to threaten, to fight, or to persecute. That is worldly use of power. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world." Pontius Pilate believed himself to be the one with the power. He was a governor and he could easily call the Roman legions to subdue this Jesus. Somehow though, Pilate sensed the power in Jesus. Something about this man was different. But Pilate really needed to hold onto his power, so he ignored the power of Jesus.

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 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. 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. It can make people frantic with fear, and desperate to control, and blind to reason. 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 forgiveness and 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 people starving in Ethiopia? 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? Are we aware of our own power and do we use it as Jesus would have us use it?

Pilate was given an opportunity to make a decision about Jesus. Each of us is given that same opportunity to choose 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 of truth and love 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?

Amen.