

Sunday, November 21, 2021

Christ The King Sunday

John 18:33-38

“What Is Truth?”

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Jesus, the king of kings, proclaims the truth of God’s love for a world distorted by lies.

Each year on the Sunday before Advent, the church celebrates the completion of the liturgical year on Christ the King Sunday. By church standards, Christ the King Sunday is a newbie to the liturgical scene – it was instituted by the Catholic church only in 1925 and only adopted by Protestants since the 1970s.

Biblical kings were rulers imbued with power. They held dominion over the people, ruling on behalf of God and holding superhuman power. As intermediaries between God and the people, kings were essential to the religious practices of Israel. Their investitures were viewed as high and holy occasions complete with festive processions and cries of praise.

But Jesus sets aside those notions. John’s snapshot of Jesus’ coronation includes unlikely images: his festive procession takes place on a donkey, his only acts of power are to wash the feet of his disciples, and his actual investiture begins with being arrested, tortured and handed over to Pilate.

Theologian Gerhard Gloege says that Jesus combines two qualities we ordinarily see as contradictory—resistance and submission. Jesus resists letting the world force him into its own image of what a king should be, yet at the same time he submitted himself by not doing anything to stop those who were handing him over to be crucified.

John shows us Jesus going toe to toe with Pilate. Their dialogue drips with sarcasm and is filled with irony: Jesus, the incarnation of the living God, the sovereign ruler of creation, is pounced on by Pilate, the incarnation of the Roman Emperor. There’s more tension in this scene than a Thanksgiving dinner with those crazy relatives who believe UFO’s are about to land and who hold a monopoly on conversations about conspiracy theories and fad diets.

Pilate is interested in expediency in keeping the crowds at bay; Jesus puts his life on the line. Pilate upholds the law of Caesar; Jesus announces the kingdom of God. Pilate dances with politics, while Jesus proclaims the truth.

But perhaps Pilate's question – whether it is taunting, mocking, cynical, sarcastic or even well intended – could be a question we have asked ourselves: what is truth? What does it mean to speak words of truth, and what does it mean when we hail Jesus as king? The truth is, well, we sometimes have a complicated relationship with truth.

One Saturday morning many years ago, the late Peter Gomes, then the distinguished preacher at Harvard University's Memorial Church, was sitting in his office when the phone rang. The caller asked, "Who is preaching at Memorial Church tomorrow morning?" As the story goes, Gomes did not want to put the caller on the spot by saying, "I am," he simply described himself in the third person. "The preacher," said Gomes, "is the Minister in the Memorial Church and the Plummer Distinguished professor of Christian Morals."

The caller paused. After a moment or two of silence, the voice continued, "Is that that short, fat, little, black man?" Irritated, Gomes simply replied, "Yes" and slammed down the phone. Later on, Gomes realized, according to Tom Long, that he misjudged the caller. Whoever was calling was not trying to be insulting, inflammatory, or even racist. In fact, the person calling was not saying anything that wasn't true. But because they did not know it was actually Gomes on the other end of the line, the caller had unintentionally deflated the renown preacher's sense of self-esteem. "Not that I think of myself as tall and blond or as a dead ringer for Denzel Washington," Gomes later observed, "I usually think of myself as more than the sum of my physical characteristics." ¹

The question Gomes faced may be the exact same question that confronts us as we gather around our Thanksgiving Tables. Do we tell the truth – always? Do we dare mention to our dear aunt that perhaps it is time to let someone else make the cranberry sauce next year? Or, on a more serious note, do we dare tell our loved ones truths are that harder to express? Do we say to our teenagers, "Here's the real reason why I'm concerned about you driving late at night." Do we say that truth to ourselves: "Here's the real reason why I shouldn't be driving?"

Do we gather around tables of relatives from mixed political and religious backgrounds prepared to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Let me know how that works out for you. "Tell all the truth," wrote Emily Dickinson, "but tell it slant...the truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind."²

¹ Quoted in Tom Long, "Testimony," p. 99.

² "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," by Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* www.poetryfoundation.org
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On the other hand, however, we know that deliberately stretching the truth or even outright lying has never been a particularly good policy. We live in what many have called a post-truth society. “Post-truth” was the Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year a few years ago – but it points to something that is hardly new. Contemporary political philosopher Lee McIntyre says truth telling while the widespread lying and disinformation is particularly acute right now, threats to truth have always existed.³ particularly unique challenge to our time.

Jesus’ stance before Pilate spells out the meaning of truth as discipleship. We are disciples, learners, followers on the way who remain committed to discovering what it means to learn the truth of Jesus—and to share those truths with those we meet.

To me that means remaining connected to communities of worship and praise. It means offering ourselves and our gifts so that the Holy Spirit can breathe new life into our faith communities. It means extending our hands in acts of loving service, even as Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. Remaining committed to learning the truth is not about clobbering others with theology or scripture, or demanding that everyone see things our way, but instead living faithfully in acts of resistance and submission to God.

Jesus’ life reveals the truth of God, and we hear his voice calling us to that truth.

If truth has always been at risk, then as scholars point out, it was especially at risk in the community to which John’s Gospel was addressed. John’s community was divided by internal squabbles and infighting, largely over what constituted “truth.” While the words “truth” and “true” only appear seven times in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, they appear 103 times in the Gospel and Letters of John.

Pilate, as imagined by Frederick Buechner, takes a long, slow drag on a cigarette he had just pledged to give up. He paces around the room. “Are you the king of the Jews?” he asks. Jesus, however, is in no mood for a debate. “Do you say this on your own, or have others spoken to you about me?” The sarcasm only continues as Pilate explores the indictment. “What have you done?” “My kingdom doesn’t come from this world,” Jesus tells him. If it did, there would have already been a revolt. Jesus is a king, just not that sort of king that Pilate would ever recognize.

³ See <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2020/02/27/part-iv-post-truth>

His kingdom is built with compassion, mercy, justice. Jesus' kingdom is a light shining in the darkness, and bread broken in the wilderness. It is new wine bursting out old wineskins, it is new life that invites the dead like Lazarus to rise from their tombs.

These are the truths we are called to speak to one another. These are the conversations which build up and strengthen communities, which allow us as families and as Christians to live faithfully.

A week or so ago I was invited to officiate at a funeral for a man whose family had no church connection. It's a common enough experience, and one that I believe offers me the chance to share the hope and love of God. I talked with the man's sister and received a whole list of attributes about him. He loved being outdoors, enjoyed nature, fishing, hunting. He was known as the family prankster, but always beloved for the joy he shared. He enjoyed riding his motorcycle. As always I took what they gave me and wove it together in a brief remarks about his life and our faith.

Apparently, this man who loved pranks was about to pull one on me. As I drove up to the funeral home, I noticed that the parking lot was filled with motorcycles – not too unusual, and after all, the family had said he loved to ride. But these were not just any motorcycles and the riders were not just any riders. They were a club, actually, more like a gang. But not only were they a gang, they were members of a notorious gang...not only a notorious gang, but perhaps the most notorious gang of all: Hell's Angels.

It was like the set up to a bad joke: a minister and a Hell's Angel member walk into a funeral home...what would I say? What words of truth would I speak to those among the least likely to go to church?

Words of truth. Words not of judgment, but of grace. Words not about death, but of life. Words that came from the one who says to us: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Take the time this Thanksgiving to speak words of truth to each other. Sprinkle your conversations with seasoning that prompts good works. Offer healing. Tell stories of justice that prompt reflection. Speak words of truth. Amen.