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Bruton Parish Episcopal Church
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Christ the King Sunday: The Last Sunday after Pentecost

John 18:33-37

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.”

What is Truth?

Today we arrive at the end of the Church year. I really hate to begin a sermon that way but I'm afraid there's no way around it. It's important that we all know that this Sunday is the Last Sunday after Pentecost and that it's commonly called Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is “sort of” a feast of the Church. Again, I hate to begin this way, but it seems necessary to explain the history of this half-feast.

There is an old saying that when the Roman Catholic Church sneezes then we Anglicans catch a cold. That seems to be what happened here. The bishop of Rome in 1925, better known as Pope Pius XI, established the feast of Christ the King to mark the 1600th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea whose debate began the formation of the Nicene Creed.

The original feast of Christ the King was to be celebrated on the last Sunday in October which was surely a reaction to an increasingly popular Protestant practice of celebrating the last Sunday of October as “Reformation Sunday” since it was on Oct. 31, 1517, that a troubled Augustinian monk named Martin nailed his 95 theses to a certain door in Wittenberg and the Reformation began.

But the 1979 Book of Common Prayer which we use—which imagines Christians sharing in the rich grace that comes with celebrating the seasons, the feasts and fasts of the Church—does not call today the Feast of Christ the King.¹ In spite of our readings and that incredible collect we prayed, the Prayer Book denotes this day as simply the “Last Sunday after Pentecost” (BCP, pg 32). So, that leaves us with the question of what to do with Christ the King Sunday? What does it really mean and what does it require of us, if anything special at all?

¹ Neil Alexander, *Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons*. This opening section relies on Bishop Alexander's explanation of the Last Sunday after Pentecost.

Again, I apologize about that lengthy introduction. Introduction over! I know I lost half of you when I began with, “Today we arrive at the end of the Church year.” Maybe tune back in now.

I know that all of you, like me, often wake up in the middle of the night thinking about our lectionary. Sometimes this lectionary of ours drives me crazy! For example, we have this exchange from John’s Gospel today between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. And it’s a powerful moment in our story. It’s a moment of judgment. This is what it looks like when the King of kings and Lord of lords comes face to face, eye to eye, with the “kings” of this world, with Empire, with principalities and powers. We get a snapshot of that encounter this morning.

What frustrates me is that the lectionary left out the last line of the whole exchange. Why would they do that? The lectionary—this way of reading through the Bible systematically and avoiding your preacher just picking whatever texts are convenient is a good idea—but today our Gospel ended prematurely with the end of a verse, rather than the end of the conversation. We literally have the entire dialogue except for six words!

It begins with Pilate asking Jesus, “Are you a king? Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus responds, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be sending in ground forces on my behalf. They’d be moving an aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean. If my kingdom were of this world,” Jesus says, “my followers would be fighting for me.”

Pilate asks, “So you are a king?”

Jesus responds, “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.” And period! Our Gospel reading ended right there, but there are six more words in the text. When Jesus says that everyone who belongs to the truth listen to his voice, Pilate comes back with the question, “What is truth?”

I’ve never understood this ending to the conversation because it’s a question that just hangs out there awkwardly like something your uncle said at Thanksgiving dinner followed by a trail of silence until someone asks you to pass the sweet potato casserole. Like our reading today, the story would go much better if we just left it out all together and gave Jesus the last word, not Pilate.

It’s hard for me to imagine what Pilate was thinking when he asked this question, “What is truth?” What was his tone like? Was it dismissive as he tired of the back and forth with Jesus? Was it a condescending, “What is truth?” Was it an honest inquiry, “What is truth?” that Jesus just ignored. It seems so incomplete to me, like the editor of this Gospel had crossed it out and added it back again, and crossed it out and added it back, as any unsure writer has done before.

I think it must have come from a place of despair. Pilate being pulled in many directions says to Jesus, “Tell me, what is truth anyway?” I think there was despair in his voice, and we can relate to despair like that.

How many times have we asked this question when we followed the false kings of this world only to realize that they were in it for themselves—that they wanted to burn our energy for the fires of their cause?

They told us that we deserve to live in luxury in the wealthiest nation on the planet, and if we bought enough nice things, then we would have enough and be enough, but it wasn't true. And we're left at the check-out counter, shopping basket full, asking a cashier, "What is truth?"

They told us, and we believed, that the work load and the busyness would lessen if we just did a little more, if we just worked a little harder. We can see an opening in a few weeks when we'll get a break, when we can catch our breath, but we're so tired now. We're so spent now. We find ourselves driving to another event, to another soccer practice. The kids hop out and we're staring at a parking lot of SUVs asking, "What is truth?"

The pundits on Fox News and CNN are angry, anxious, and afraid but we can't turn it off. They told us that things would get better if our guy won, if our party was in charge. They told us that those other people were idiots and we can't let them have power. What about the judges they'll pick and forget about your health care! But you just voted how they told you to and you're still unsure. All you can think about as you put on the "I voted" sticker is the question, "What is truth?"

I'd like to know. Would you like to know what is truth? I know that I do.

Let's circle back to how we started this thing because even if this feast is the new kid on the block, it taps into something—into someone—who is older and brighter than the stars: *Today we arrive at the end of the Church year*. In our worship we, like Pilate, come face to face this day, eye to eye, with Christ the King. In our Gospel reading today, we thought that it was Jesus on trial but actually it was us—it was us and our world, and honestly that is good news if you care about truth. All the loyalties of this past year—all of the times that we made monarchs of false kings and bent our knees to them—they are all here before the Alpha and the Omega, the King of kings and Lord of lords, and today we leave them behind for the truth of the eternal Reign of Christ.

We are being judged this day by the God who knows all too well our idolatry and loves us anyway. I know that Divine judgment brings up all kinds of fear-filled images of apocalyptic end times but "In the Bible, Divine judgment confronts us with truth—something people of faith welcome and yearn for. It brings to light the sham, the duplicity, the lies and injustice that riddle nations and wrecks them. [And] it exposes the secrets of our hearts so [we may] be purified"²

What is truth? At least Pilate was asking the right guy.

The truth is that we are here, we are the Church, because Christ is our King. He showed up proclaiming that the eternal reign of God is at hand. He is a King whose law is love, whose

² Julia Gatta, *Life in Christ*, 58.

territory is as big as the cosmos and as local as our hearts! He is a king whose soldiers beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, whose Church is a visible sacrament of his reign because we were dead but now we are alive, we were lost but he has found us.

Will you make him your king? Will you be a citizen of his kingdom? It requires us to lay down our loyalty to self, to political party and country, and to redefine family. Our world is so divided and enslaved by sin and we're a part of that—we contribute to it! If you want out of that division, if you need liberation, then step into the Reign of Christ and you will meet the Truth—and he will set you free. Amen.