

Sunday November 24th, 2024
Christ the King Sunday

PRAYER: Gracious God, who rules over all rulers but in a manner unlike any of them, we celebrate the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When we compare their rules with his, we can marvel at the difference. Their rules scatter their subjects; his, gathers them. Their rule breeds fear; his hope. We prefer his rule to theirs, yet we permit theirs to eclipse his. So, we pray, O God that you will grant us the wisdom and courage so to enthrone your will that Christ, if he cannot rule through our leaders, will at least rule over us.

STEWARDSHIP: God is the source of our deliverance and hope and he invites us to live forever in his favour. We come now to offer ourselves to God in response to Christ's call. Out of the abundance of God's love we offer gifts to him. From the storehouse of God's mercy, we bring him our treasures. May God accept the proceeds of our labour and use them to bring him glory forever and ever.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Eternal God, who was and is and is yet to be, we bow before you in awe and adoration. When life pushes us into a corner, we run from you only to find that from you there is no escape-that, no matter how we get off the course, you will not let us off the hook. For this, dear Lord, we are grateful. How good it is to know that we are loved by anybody. Yet how much better it is to know that the One who loves us, above all others, is the God of creation and Lord of history-the Savior of the world and the ruler of the universe.

For centuries we have hailed you as our God and called ourselves your people. We have worshiped you as King of kings and called all other monarchs your agents. Yet we have not judged their rule by yours, measured their law by yours or tested their teaching by yours. Confronted by your demand for a clear-cut either/or, we have opted for Caesar's offer of a both/and. Face to face with Caesar's agents, we have taken the path of least resistance. When they weighted the scales of justice on the side of the strong, we were not blind, yet we remained silent. When they inflated the price of political office in favor of the rich, we saw the danger, yet we remained silent. If only we could plead ignorance!

But we were not ignorant-only silent. We had already begun to see the handwriting on the wall. We knew even then that the cost of compromise would run high and one day compromise your rule. Now that the day for payment is at hand, we will not insult you by pleading either ignorance or innocence, for we are as guilty as sin. We were aware, O Lord, that your dominion is not of this world. Yet we have behaved as if it were. We betrayed you, but you were not the only victim. There were others, many others: not only those who looked to us for guidance, but those whom we might have led to look to you.

Grant us, O Lord, the courage to put our sin behind us even as you have put it behind you. Help us, henceforth, so to live as to bear witness to the truth for which Christ lived and died and still lives. Guide us by your spirit that our neighbours, when they turn to us, will find clarity in the midst of confusion; support, in the midst of sorrow; unity, in the midst of division; purpose, in the midst of aimlessness; and you, in the midst of despair. So, fill us with your love that we might become temporal witnesses to your eternal rule. Let us hope that, as a consequence, the rulers of this world will accept your rule-a rule that is not of this world.

BENEDICTION: O Christ, you reign over the rulers of the earth. Yet your rule is not of this world. As you send us forth, help us remember that the domain of your rule is not a particular land but the human heart; that the method of your rule is not the demand from above but the choice from below; and that the symbol of your rule is not a crown but a cross.

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John 18:33-38a
“The Question of the Ages”

In the far-flung corner of Norfolk County a few years back, a group of federal politicians was making the rounds trying to drum up support. They were stopping at all the political events, kissing the babies, and glad handing everyone they met. Unfortunately, as they were heading to an event near Port Rowan, they were in a terrible traffic accident. Because it is a bit isolated in that corner of the county, it took the OPP some time to reach the scene with an ambulance in tow.

Upon reaching the scene, they found the wrecked vehicle, but no sign of the politicians. Instead, they found an old farmer near the wrecked car leaning on a shovel. The officer asked, “where are the car’s occupants?” To which the farmer replied, “I buried them.” The officer was shocked and asked, “They were all dead?” To which the farmer replied, “Oh, they claimed they weren’t, but you know how politicians lie.”

Perhaps as never before, has the question about the value of truth been so debated. Currently we are undergoing one of the most egregious displays of falsehood ever demonstrated by a major political leader. On November 12th of this year, President Trump, in reaction to the devastating fires in California said, “There is no reason for these massive, deadly, and costly forest fires in California except that forest management is so poor.”

This is just one of ongoing daily barrages of false claims, and inuendo, spewed from the current/former president. And although we live in a parliamentary democracy, there are some critical lessons about leadership, governance, and political power raised in our Gospel lesson today. At the heart of this significant moment in the passion experience of Jesus, is this encounter with Pilate that seeks to understand what makes for a good king.

Now John’s trial scene is quite different from the other Gospels, and to truly capture the heart of it, we need to set the other accounts aside, and just let John’s account flow without distraction. In John’s account, the trial event before Pilate is arranged into 7-8 little moments, punctuated by Pilate’s trips out to meet with Jewish leaders. Each scene-and the whole trial in John- centers on kingship.

First, (18:28-32) we learn that Jesus is accused of sedition, or of making himself a king. Then our passage today (18:33-38a) questions about the nature of kingship are raised. Then Pilate brings out Barabbas, and the choice laid before the people is a king, or a violent offender. They choose the criminal. In 19:1-3 Jesus is crowned king with a crown of thorns. He is then dressed in a purple robe which is the colour of royalty.

In John 19:8-11 Jesus’ authority as king and Son of God is revealed. In John 19:12-16 Jesus is presented as the King of the Jews. Finally, Jesus is exalted on the cross, and reigns as King of the Jews. The issue of Jesus’ kingship has already been raised in John chapter 6. After Jesus feed the multitude, the crowd tries to seize him and force him to be king. And it is with devastating irony that in John 19:15 the crowds gathered for his trial, shout out, “We have no King but Caesar!”

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Christ the King Sunday

The questions before Pilate, and now us, are quite clear. Is Jesus a King, and if so, what is the nature of his kingship?

Today's passage is the selected lesson for Christ the King Sunday. The last Sunday of the church year. It is the second little scene John shows us, in which Pilate has just returned from meeting the Jewish leaders outside his home, (remember this was very near the Passover, and the Jewish leaders did not want to defile themselves by entering a Gentile's home.) In his meeting with the leaders, Pilate sought to understand the charge they had leveled at Jesus.

It is important that we not misunderstand the nature of Pilate. Historians know that Pilate was a brutal governor. He despised his posting in Palestine, feeling he had been relegated to the boondocks of the empire. It was, likely in his mind, a major setback to his political ambitions. Pilate was also, not above using the sword to suppress any sign of insurrection by the Jews.

In describing Pilate's personality, Philo writes in the 1st century that Pilate had a "vindictive and furious temper", and was "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness". Referring to Pilate's governance, Philo further describes "his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine (violently seizing property), and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity".

In the case of Jesus, Pilate is annoyed, irritated. Coming to him and bothering him with what he considers a Jewish religious matter. The Jewish leaders want Jesus dead for blasphemy. For claiming he was the son of God. This charge, however, was irrelevant to Pilate. The Romans forbade the Jews from executing anyone without Roman permission, so to try and get Pilate to sign off, they couch their charges against Jesus as a potential threat to Roman rule.

Thus, Pilate bluntly asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" John does something very interesting in this passage. Rather than Pilate being the interrogator and judge in this trial, Jesus takes on the role. Pilate is not in control of this situation, even if he pretends, he is, and Jesus knows it. (see 19:10-11) This blurring of judicial and political roles is a favourite subject of John's. Another example of this is in 19:13.

The text reads that Pilate, "brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench." The verb used here is interesting, because it's not clear whether it was Pilate, or Jesus, who sat on the bench. But it is very clear who the real judge was. Pilate asks him directly, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus then opens the question up further and asks, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me."

You can almost sense the building frustration in Pilate who respond, "I'm not a Jew, am I?" Of course, he isn't a Jew. He is quite the opposite. He is a Roman governor, representing a piece of the empire that is oppressing the Jews, repressing Jesus' people. John sometimes uses the title "The Jews", to represent all those who opposed Jesus. In John 1:11, John declares, "He came to what was his own, and his people did not accept him."

Sunday November 24th, 2024
Christ the King Sunday

As Pilate becomes more and more entrenched in his opposition to Jesus, and his refusal to find the truth, when it is staring him in the face, Pilate becomes indistinguishable from those who handed Jesus over to him. “So, you are a king?” Pilate again asks. But Jesus does not say he is a king, nor does he anywhere in the Gospel.

Instead, and this is very important, Jesus talks about the nature of his kingdom, which we can also call community. This is where Jesus differentiates himself from Caesar, Pilate, or any other worldly king or leader. For Pilate, power and authority were to be used for selfish ends with no concern for building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Pilate hoards power, and is constantly seeking to keep power, and gain more.

His fear of losing power is ultimately why he turns Jesus over to be crucified. It is also why he insists on the sign being put over his head on the cross. “The king of the Jews”. And why he refused to edit the sign as the Jews wanted it to read “He said he was the king of the Jews”. Something that Jesus never claimed. Instead in Jesus’ kingdom, he empowers others and uses his authority to wash the feet of those he leads.

He spends his life on his subjects, giving every ounce of it. He gives his life to bring life to his kingdom, his people. Pilate’s rule was one of terror, even when things were relatively calm. Jesus’ reign brings peace, even amid terror. John 14:27 reads, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

No wonder Jesus refers to us as sheep. As creatures often living in fear, and easily startled. As Governor, Pilate encouraged his followers to imitate him by using violence to conquer and divide people by race and ethnicity. “Am I a Jew?” Jesus’ followers are to put away their swords in order to invite and unify people, as Jesus does when he says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”. (12:32)

We might forget that Pilate’s authority was always tenuous. He served the pleasure of Caesar. Remember the threat the Jews used saying that if Pilate did not crucify Jesus, he was no friend of Caesar’s. At any time, and for any reason, Pilate’s career could be over. Pilate’s term as prefect of Judaea ended after an incident recounted by Josephus. A large group of Samaritans had been persuaded by an unnamed man to go to Mount Gerizim in order to see sacred artifacts allegedly buried by Moses.

But at a village named Tirathana, before the crowd could ascend the mountain, Pilate sent in “a detachment of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry, who in an encounter with the firstcomers in the village, slew some in a pitched battle, and put the others to flight. Many prisoners were taken, of whom Pilate put to death the principal leaders, and those who were most influential.” The Samaritans then complained to Vitellius, Roman governor of Syria, who sent Pilate to Rome to explain his actions regarding this incident to Tiberius. However, by the time Pilate got to Rome, Tiberius had died. Pilate was never back to Judea.

Jesus lays before Pilate the nature of his kingdom, but all Pilate can hear is the possible threat to his own authority. “So, you are a king?” Jesus pushes on to the very heart of the matter.

Sunday November 24th, 2024
Christ the King Sunday

Truth itself is on trial here and Jesus is the star witness. Will Pilate side with truth or cynicism? Well, we know how it all turned out, don't we?

Pastor Chuck Swindoll gave a message about the sinister sin of cynicism. He told the story of meeting a janitor in a church somewhere.

He said to the janitor, "You have a beautiful facility here. Busy on Sunday morning?" The janitor looked up and said, "Yeah, we process about 2,500 units every Sunday." Something serious had happened in the heart of the janitor, where "people" became "units." For Pilate, people, particularly Jews, were nothing more than units. They represented management problems, never a community.

Pilate did not want a relationship with those he ruled. They were pests, who unset his nicely ordered world. The only truth that mattered to him was any version of the truth that served his purposes. Truth that supported his narrative of what was happening around him. This was especially true when it came to his encounter with Jesus. No wonder he stands, and publicly washes his hands of the whole thing.

I was interested to finally read in a few places something that I was suspicious of already. Many social and psychological commentators and scholars are now defining these days in which we live as "the post-truth era". We've talked about this before, how what seems to matter today is not objective facts, but rather how things make us feel. People are now throwing around ideas, and falsehoods as if they are factual, because it feels true.

Pilate asked the question; we should be asking every day. "What is truth?" Now here is the thing that I take from this philosophically charged debate between Pilate and Jesus. If Jesus is the embodiment of truth itself (remember he said he was the way the truth and the life) and his kingdom, his community, is the embodiment of himself. If then the church is the body of Christ as the Apostle Paul says, I think it follows that we, the community of Christ should embody truth. The truth as Christ demonstrated and died for.

If we claim allegiance to Christ our King, then we are to be people of truth. And I state the obvious when I say that the truth we embody is the objective, verifiable truth, that the world seems to be shunning, especially these days. The truth we embody is that we exist not to be served, but to serve. We embody the truth that it is better to lose this world than forfeit our souls. We embody the truth that loving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us, is the only way to abundant living.

We embody the truth that in a world of clamouring voices, and competing claims on our loyalty, we are and always will be Christ's people. There is one other lesson I have gleaned from this passage this time going through it. I think one of the reasons Pilate struggled to know what was true, and maybe some contemporary political figures are having the same struggle, is that Pilate lacked the one thing that would have assured a connection to the truth. Community.

Pilate was a lone wolf. He looked at the world and decided his truth, his perspective, was what mattered.

Sunday November 24th, 2024
Christ the King Sunday

Not even an encounter with the very embodiment of truth itself, namely Jesus, caused him to recognize his separation from truth. In the end, he was swayed not by truth and certainly not by justice, but by what served his own selfish ambition. When you fall into the trap of thinking only you know what is best for anyone, even yourself, you are in isolation.

I mentioned last week that the writer to the Hebrews, commended us not to forgo the assembling of ourselves together. There are lots of reasons for this wise council.

But in connection with today's lesson, one of the reasons we need to assemble is to garner truth, preserve truth, and discern truth. Yes, sometimes we will think we are right, and everyone else is wrong, but even then, the truth may be elusive to us. No wonder Chuck Swindoll talked about the sinister nature of the sin of cynicism. The more we drift from the most reliable source of truth, the body of Christ, the more prone we are to this sin.

I love what Carey Nieuwolf said in a podcast about cynicism. "Cynicism" he states, "is subtle, but it's identifiable because it means, ultimately, the loss of hope. One of the trademarks of cynicism is you take your past failures, and your past hurts, and you start projecting them onto the future. Your past hurt starts to pronounce a death sentence on your future. Most cynics are former optimists. You find leaders who want to care but have stopped.

When I close my heart to people, I close my heart to God. Love requires an engagement of the heart, an engagement of the mind, an engagement of the will, and that is something that cynical people won't do." (Church Leaders.com)

Cynicism cannot flourish in the presence of Christ. For among God's people there resides hope, and therefore a future. So, once again I ask you the question of the ages. "What is truth?" Or better yet, "Who is truth