

Last Sunday after Pentecost B 2018

Christ the King,

November 25, 2018

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."

According to the Church calendar (which is different from our secular calendar), today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, begins a new year. On the last Sunday of the year, the Church celebrates the Feast of Christ the King. Now historically speaking, this Feast is a rather recent addition to the Christian Calendar, being established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to growing secularism and nationalism.¹ Today, the Feast of Christ the King continues to serve that purpose: it holds up a very needed reminder for us Christians that we are ruled not by the principalities and powers of this world, but rather by the principles and power of the Kingdom of God so clearly revealed through Christ. For in our lives today, the values of *this* world and our unquestioned trust in ourselves, our group, our wealth, our power, our nation can easily overwhelm and supplant the values of Christ and our trust in **God's** Kingdom. The temptation to put our trust in ourselves and in the instruments and methods of this world is indeed great, for the instruments and methods of this world are all that many people know. That's why, despite the declining popularity of the Christian Church in recent years, the Church (including Christ Church) has never been more needed. For we hold up and hold dear the Kingdom of God in the midst of secularism and nationalism, as Pope Pius said in 1925.

In the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, when the Wise Men, guided by God's star, come to the worldly and merciless King Herod to inquire where the NEW King of the Jews is to be born, there is no mistaking the theme of the collision of Kingdoms which begins with Jesus' birth and runs throughout Matthew's Gospel: the Kingdom of the Prince of Peace and Love versus the Kingdom of worldly power and self-centeredness. We see that same theme in today's reading from John, where Pontius Pilate represents the authority and military power of the Roman Empire and Jesus, on the other hand, represents the **vulnerable** Kingdom of the One, True God of the universe – the one true God of our lives.

“My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus tells Pilate.

But “Pilate catches none of this distinction between an earthly realm and another reality,” writes Fr. John Shea. “Political men reduce everything to political terms. ‘King’ is Pilate’s word... Jesus, the spiritual man, has another self-designation. He is a witness to the truth. [He testifies to the truth.] He lives within - and reveals - the ultimate relationship to God and creation. Those who are fixated on political power cannot open to this spiritual depth. But those who **are** aware of the *spiritual* will hear Jesus’ voice. The truth *they know* will **draw** them to the truth *he is*.”²

My friends, this ongoing, repeated reorientation from reliance on the powers and systems of this world to reliance on God is perhaps the primary mission of the Church. For it is all too easy for us to allow our attention to be fixated not on spiritual things but on worldly things, like the temptation to solve all our problems by exercising our power and control rather than surrendering to God’s presence within and among us, and trying to understand, have compassion, and to listen to where others are coming from. Christian churches – including us here at Christ Church – strive to keep the Kingdom of God alive and well amidst the seductive, ego-driven, power-driven kingdoms of this world which wash over us like a tidal wave everywhere we turn. Only if we build our house on a rock can we withstand this unending tidal wave; and the Church provides guidance and direction for building one’s house on rock, anchoring our lives in the Kingdom of God.

In a clear illustration of the clash between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God, Fr. Shea draws attention to Luke’s story about Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane reacting violently to the armed soldiers who come to arrest Jesus. “Peter, in a preemptive strike, cuts off the ear of the servant of the High Priest (Luke 22:50-51). Jesus says simply, ‘No more of this,’ and heals the man, restoring his ear. Jesus has spent his entire ministry giving people ears to hear, he is not about to start taking them off now. The **symbolic** import is that the beginning of violence is the end of dialogue. That is why Peter’s sword severs the ear. Combatants can no longer hear one another. Ears have to be restored for dialogue to happen and for violence to end.”²

The temptation is strong for you and I to **also** react to any perceived threat by stopping all listening.

“Jesus *refuses* the sword of Peter,” continues Fr. Shea... “The world that Jesus comes from relies on **love** as its sole strategy and protection. The wager is that when people *hear* about this love, they will **recognize** it as what they have always wanted... what they have been looking for all along.”² For the seed of love is planted deep within us by the God who IS love and who created us in the Divine Image. And I know that Christ Church is a reservoir and transmitter of this divine love.

“...Jesus is not *only* a revelation of divine love,” Fr. Shea continues; “he is a **mirror** to the unknown territory of the human heart. People *know themselves* when they see him...”³

We know ourselves when we truly **see** Christ.

And this is another grace that works within and through the Church – within and through Christ Church. For together – through prayer, worship, study, sharing our lives, serving together, reaching out to those in great need – we seek to come home to our true identity in God, our True Self, who we *really* are, and to live our lives *from* that space of honesty and vulnerability. For we are *not* our egos, those false selves we have spent so much of our lives constructing in order that we might hide our brokenness and unforgiveness and things we are afraid to reveal, while showing a glittering image to the world. We know our True Selves, who we *really* are in God, when we see Christ. And the Church – Christ Church – helps people **see** Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says he was born and came into this world to be a witness to the **truth**; and together as the body of Christ here in this place we courageously *seek* that truth in both our inner and outer lives. Where else in our society are we challenged to see **God’s** truth? Where else are we taught how to look within our own hearts, question our unconscious motivations, remove the plank from our own eye before we try to take the speck from our neighbor’s eye? Our **culture** surely does not encourage such penetrating, relentless self-honesty, examination of our souls, and witness to the Truth.

I wonder if a major reason that the Church has become less and less popular in recent years is that we the Church, like Jesus in today’s Gospel, proclaim a kingdom that is not of this world, **and** we worship a *vulnerable* King? In the Church – here in Christ Church – we hear words that we rarely (if ever) hear from our culture: forgive 70x7, turn the other cheek, don’t judge, care for the poor and outcast, go the extra mile, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. These **Gospel** values are totally *opposite* to our society’s encouragement of retaliation, constant judgment of others, looking out only for ourselves, and *opposing* – even hating – our enemies. At Christ Church we hold these values up to the light of God’s truth – to which Jesus witnesses. We live out our baptismal vows and live into our Christ identity, and we **know** that the teaching and example of Jesus puts first and foremost the values of compassion and love and hospitality and welcoming the stranger, recognizing, as the Letter to the Hebrews states, that *we ourselves* are “strangers and exiles on the earth.” (11:13)

My friends, we are called to bring forth the rule of Christ the King within our hearts and within our community, and in many wonderful ways, I see it happening among you! On this Thanksgiving weekend, I am so very grateful for each of you, and for the privilege of participating with you as a fellow member of the Body of Christ in this place where Christ’s vulnerable love reigns.

AMEN

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_Christ_the_King

2 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 276

3 John Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 276-277