

## Last Sunday after Pentecost B 2021

### Christ the King

November 21, 2021

*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 year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, begins a new year on the Church's calendar. On this 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.<sup>1</sup> And 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 Jesus. 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 all-too-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, methods and mindset of this world are all that many people know. That's why, despite the declining attendance in Christian Churches 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 before 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, the motif, 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's Gospel, where Pontius Pilate represents the authority and military power of the Roman Empire, and Jesus, on the other hand, represents the **vulnerable** and self-giving 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, as John Shea notes, “Pilate catches none of this distinction between an earthly realm and another reality. Political men reduce everything to political terms. ‘King’ is **Pilate’s** word... [whereas] 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*.”<sup>2</sup> Those who are aware of the *spiritual* will hear Jesus’ voice. The truth *they know* will **draw** them to the truth *he is*.

My friends, this ongoing, repeated reorientation from reliance on the powers and systems and mindset of this world to reliance on God and God’s Kingdom, the Realm of the Spirit, 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 Spirit within and among us. The mission of Christian churches – which includes us – is to reveal and manifest the Kingdom of God which is always present *beneath* the seductive, ego-driven, power-driven kingdoms of this world which seem to wash over us like a tidal wave everywhere we turn. Only if we build our house on rock can we withstand this relentless tidal wave; and the Church provides guidance and direction for building one’s house on rock, anchoring our lives in the Kingdom of God and, like Jesus, testifying to the Truth with our lives.

In a clear illustration of the clash between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God, John Shea draws our 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, and 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.”<sup>2</sup>

And, my friends, if you are at all like me, the temptation is strong to react to any perceived threat by cutting off our listening to each other, **and** our listening to the voice of God.

“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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.

And "...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..."<sup>3</sup>

We *know ourselves* when we *truly see* Christ in ourselves, in our world, and in each other.

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, vulnerability, and love. 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 vulnerability and unforgiveness and other things we are afraid to reveal, all the while showing an acceptable outward image and persona to the world. We know our True Selves, who we *really* are in God, when we see Christ. And the mission of the Church is to help people *see* Christ in our world, in each other, and in our own hearts, and become "little Christs" ourselves.

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 **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, the Realm of the Spirit where Christ is King? Where else but in the Church? 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 and witness to the Truth.

In the Church –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 **Kingdom-of-God** values are totally *opposite* to our society's encouragement of retaliation, constant judgment of others, looking out only for ourselves, and *opposing* – even hating or killing – our enemies. At Christ Church we hold this world's 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 us, already! As we approach Thanksgiving this Thursday, I am so very thankful 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](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