

“THE KING OF TRUTH”

The Rev. Victor Kim

John 18:33-37

(11-21-21) CTK

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. While the regular calendar begins on January 1 each year, the church calendar begins with the first Sunday in Advent, which is next week. So this morning we mark the last Sunday of the church year, which is known as the Reign of Christ Sunday, or perhaps more commonly, Christ the King Sunday. While the church has long understood and affirmed the confession of Christ as King, it was only in 1925 that Pope Pious XI formally instituted the feast of Christ the King as a response to concerns about rising secularism. **So has it stemmed the tide of rising secularism? I hardly think so!**

As Canadians, most of us have been aware of the precarious health status of Queen Elizabeth. At the age of 95, she is finally showing signs of slowing down. I think I speak for many Canadians when I say that the Queen has been a remarkable figure, not only for Canada, but certainly for Great Britain and the Commonwealth. She is a nearly universally respected figure and has carried out her duties as faithfully and competently as any monarch in history. I do wonder though about the future of the monarchy and whether people would have the same level of support for the future king. A recent survey of Canadians revealed that a majority agreed with the statement that the monarchy is out of date and no longer has its place in the 21st century and that it should be done away with. But the majority also indicated that they didn't really care enough to do anything about it. Many Canadians, it seems, have moved beyond the need for the monarchy. **But have we moved beyond the need for Christ as King?** I suppose that depends on what we think of what it means to be king. Our text this morning from the gospel according to John deals with two very different views of kingship.

The passage comes from John's account of Jesus' encounter with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. The Jewish authorities, who had arrested Jesus, sent him to Pilate so that Pilate could sentence Jesus to death. But Pilate was reluctant. He had enough problems governing that wild and far off province without having to get in the middle of a Jewish power struggle. But the charge was a serious one. This Jesus was purported to have claimed to be a king, the King of the Jews. Back in Rome, the one thing that Caesar would not tolerate within the vast diversity of his empire, would have been any challenges to his authority. So Pilate asks Jesus, **are you the King of the Jews?** Jesus doesn't offer a direct answer and later he says, my kingdom is not from this world for if it were, my followers would fight for me, but my kingdom is not from here. Pilate is more confused than ever. So are you a king or not? Jesus answers, you say that I am, 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. Though our reading of the text ends there, it is impossible to read our text without hearing Pilate's reply, **what is truth?** What is truth? I don't know how you hear it, but I hear a cynical tone in Pilate's voice. **What is truth? Your truth may be true for you, but my truth is true for me.** Pilate found himself then, as we find ourselves today, in a time where pluralism and diversity threatened to render as an impossibility any suggestion of an absolute truth. Maybe the Jewish authorities had told Pilate that this Jesus had been telling his disciples that he was the way, the truth, and the life. For Pilate, it was hard enough trying to govern a people whose traditions and beliefs were so foreign to him and the last thing he needed was some young rabble rouser who went around claiming to **be The Truth**. The only truth that mattered was that he, Pilate, held the power of life and death over this man.

And why wouldn't he think that? For many in our world truth isn't some esoteric discussion. Truth is what works, truth is what's pragmatic, truth is what's rational. **And yet, as we hear this text, we wonder, who's really on trial here?** Pragmatism, rationality and power would tell us that Pilate holds all of the cards. Jesus

has no room to maneuver. But I get the sense that Pilate is the nervous one and he's the one backed into the corner. **Pilate may think that power is the arbiter of truth, but Jesus knows that truth is the arbiter of power. That which is powerful is not always true, but that which is true is always powerful.** Jesus before Pilate was not powerful, at least not in the world's sense of power. But he was true, he was the truth, **and thus he held a power which was not Pilate's to grant or to take away.**

What is truth? Asks Pilate. The question lingers for us today. What is truth to you? Jesus says that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Do we belong to the truth? **Is the voice we listen to the voice of Jesus, or is it some other voice? Is Jesus king of our lives, and if not, who or what is? And if Jesus isn't king, what role does he play?**¹

Our answer to the question, is Jesus king of our lives, will depend greatly on what we think the truth is about life. For many the truth about life is embodied in what Pontius Pilate represents. He is powerful, he is wealthy, he is connected. But the problem is that he is not really free. For all his authority, Pilate is a prisoner of the limitations of rational, sensible belief. As an agent of the empire, he is beholden to the empire's pragmatism. But Jesus, despite his seeming powerlessness, in spite of his lack of possessions and connections, **his is the life that is truly free. His is the life that pulsates with the possibilities of imagination.**

Doug Lee, in, "The Ultimate Imagination," writes, the truth about life is that it's not ours to guard. The world thinks that Pilate had all the options and Jesus had none. The idea of submission is thought to be the narrowest of options. But Jesus demonstrates that submission to the Father is vast **because embracing our humility before God opens us up to options previously closed to us.** Jesus, not Pilate, is the one with room to maneuver because he is not defined by all of the limitations of self-preservation and self-aggrandizement. Pilate is the one whose hands are tied. **But Jesus is free – free to suffer, free to be misunderstood, free to die.**²

What kind of king is this and what kind of kingdom does he represent? **Well, it certainly isn't of this world.** The kingdom Jesus speaks of is one in which our conventional thinking is turned upside down. **It is where those who wish to be first must be last and the servant of all. It is where those who want to save their lives must be willing to lose them for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the gospel. It's where those who are poor and those who mourn, where those who are meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be called blessed. The kingdom Jesus speaks of is one in which the outsider is brought in, where the outcast is embraced, where the neglected are cared for and the scandalous and the sinner are accepted. Its where poor widows are lifted up and the religious establishment is called out on their hypocrisy and duplicity.** The kingdom Jesus speaks of is something Pilate would have had a tough time recognizing. **What about us? Is Jesus king of our lives, or is there something else, someone else?** We live in times of uncertainty and people long for someone, something, to help make sense of the senseless. I don't know about you, but I find watching the news or reading the newspapers these days almost to be an act of self-inflicted punishment. You know what the headlines will be. The Covid-19 pandemic, how many more cases, how many more deaths, how many more in the ICU. Then stories of climate change, flooding, atmospheric rivers, forest fires, tornados in places rarely seen before, melting glaciers, temperatures rising globally, followed by stories of more unmarked graves being found on former residential school sites. Fractured relationships with indigenous peoples, with other nations, refugee crises, the cost of living increasing at rates not seen in a generation.

¹ Kate Huey, "A Wise Reign"

² Doug Lee, "Ultimate Imagination," The Ekklesia Project, 2009

Inflation is rising far more quickly than most of our wages, but did you know that the wealth of American billionaires like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos has risen by 70% during the pandemic, by over \$2.1 trillion since March of 2020. The wealthiest Canadians haven't been left behind either, having increased their wealth by \$78 billion in the first year of the pandemic.

These are challenging times, at least for most of us. We want truth but we can't even agree on what truth is. Whether its vaccines, climate change, issues around opioid addiction, truth is sought but not everyone agrees on what it is. **But it should be obvious by now that the truth of this world is powerless to change what it itself has created. Clearly, we have not moved beyond the need for Christ as King.**

If we look for truth which is rooted in us, despite our best and most noble attempts, we will fail because even our best will let us down, because even our best is, in the end, only human, all too human. **There is only one who offers true and lasting hope; there is only one who can truly save us. Is Jesus king of our lives, and if not, who, or what, is?**

But if Jesus is king, truly king, then everything changes, the possibilities become endless and we become open to options previously unthinkable to us. If Jesus is king, we need to live as his disciples, continuing to listen for his voice. **The theologian Walter Brueggemann says that the truth evidenced in Jesus is not an idea, not a concept, not a formulation, not a fact. It is rather a way of being in the world in suffering and hope, so radical and so raw that we can scarcely entertain it.**

Can you entertain the idea of seeking justice and compassion even if your career, even if your life were to be put at risk? Can you entertain the thought of standing publicly with those whose right to live without fear and without hatred have been breached? Can you imagine making a significant commitment of your resources to people and projects which won't necessarily make any change to your life or bring any enjoyment to you, but might make the difference between life and death for someone else? Can you imagine a way of being in the world, a way of living with hope even in the midst of suffering and being in solidarity with those who hurt, grieve, are lonely, are shut out, are forgotten, forsaken, forlorn? **I hope we can, I pray we can, because if we as the people of God can't, who do you think can?** Thank God that Jesus is king, still king, always king. Thank God that Jesus is the king of truth, who speaks the words that we who belong to the truth must hear, understand and take to heart.

Jesus was very clear, despite Pilate's inability to understand. And Jesus continues to be very clear, despite our inability or perhaps unwillingness to understand. Let's be clear about the truth Jesus speaks of and embodies. It is not the truth of this world. His kingdom is rooted in the truth of a very different reality, a very different set of values and principles. But in Jesus, these values and these principles have become flesh and in him the promise has become reality and those who would be his disciples need to listen to the voice of truth, following faithfully the calling of our King. Jesus is a king unlike any king the world has ever known.

He is a king who reigns, not from a throne, **but from a cross.** He is a king who reigns, not through the exercise of power, **but through the embrace of suffering.** He is a king who reigns, not by power, **but through humility and obedience.** He is a king who reigns, not by self-preservation, **but by self-sacrifice.** **He is the King of Truth and the voice of this king speaks the truth, and if we know his truth, his truth will set us free. Jesus sets us free. And that's the truth.**

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen!