

Christ the King Sunday YB 2024

How to Tell the Truth

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Christ the King is a threshold Sunday, holding a door between the Season after Pentecost and the Season of Advent. There wasn't always this door. When this feast was put into the calendar by Pope Pius XI after WWI, it was because he was concerned about the rise of secular nationalism and what it meant about the power of the Roman Catholic Church. At that time, the pope and his church were contending with the loss of temporal power, the power that grew since Constantine, reaching its apex in the Medieval time. Recall that the pope had his armies then and was able to make and unmake kings and emperors. In 1925, with secularism rising, the question was how hard should the Roman Catholic Church work to retain power. Eventually, this feast was a time to contemplate the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the earthly kingdoms. Interestingly, this feast was adopted by many Protestant denominations, including Episcopalians.

But today, in 2024, the questions aren't, "Should popes have armies? Or, should he crown kings?" Much work has been done, especially in the US, to separate church and state. By law, the church cannot advocate for a specific candidate. But, it isn't illegal for churches to take an official position on propositions. The Episcopal Church, in fact, has an advocacy arm in D.C. called Episcopal Public Policy Network (EPPN), which advocates for laws that protect and benefit the poor, laborers, children, the mentally ill, immigrants and refugees, and racial and sexual minorities—essentially the most vulnerable in our country. The issues that the EPPN take up are voted on at our General Convention.

So, the "separation of church and state" is actually legally fairly narrow, and The Episcopal Church works hard to work with temporal powers to create a just and kind society. And yet, we have an ambivalent relationship with this work for fear

of being “political”. The questions we can ask today, on Christ the King Sunday, might be these: How are we citizens of God’s kingdom and citizens of the US? What does allegiance to God’s kingdom mean about our responsibilities to the places we live that are ruled by temporal powers? What ought we to do to “care for widows and orphans” and announce peace on earth and goodwill to all—the values of God’s kingdom—when it might go against the interests of the temporal kingdom? How does one work for the salvation of nations (which is in the final judgment) and not just individuals?

So, we stand at the threshold, at the gate, pondering the culmination of the Season After Pentecost and the beginning of the Season of Advent and the kingship of Jesus. At the gate, we hear about the trial of Jesus by Pilate from the Gospel of John.

Before the portion we read today, we recall that Jesus has been struck in the face by his own people, bound and taken to Pilate who is the governor of Judea set up by Rome. Jesus is taken into Pilate’s headquarters while Pilate figures out what all the commotion is about. He must have laughed when the crowd outside complained to Pilate, “We arrested him because he claimed to be our king!” Pilate must have responded something like, “What?! That skinny guy in homespun? You’ve got to be kidding!” He must have laughed all the way to his headquarters.

Pilate has a smirk on his face when he enters his headquarters. “So, I hear that you’re the King of the Jews. Seriously, what have you done to merit such a ridiculous title? I mean come on, look at you!”

Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, I would use my power to unleash my followers on you and they would take up arms and fight you. As it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate replies, “So, you have a kingdom, huh? Hah, so the people who turned you in were right: you are claiming to be a king.”

Jesus replies, “You are thinking of kingship in the only category you know—to claim power and retain power. So, you call me a king and you think I want what you have. But, I don’t come for that. I am here to testify to the truth.”

Pilate interrupts, “Bah, what is truth? You know what truth is? Truth is weak. Truth is easily conquered. You just have to tell enough lies and people will not be able to sort out the truth from the lies. It’s called misinformation.”

But Jesus tells Pilate that his followers know the truth. They are the ones who hear his voice and follow him. When they listen to him, they will know the way, the truth and the life.

How does that land for you? Is the truth any easier to discern because you follow Jesus? I think about the crowds that ate the bread that Jesus multiplied near the beginning of the Gospel of John. They ate it and wanted more. In fact, they wanted an ever-reliable source of bread. Jesus will be their bread factory and their king! So, they tried to take him by force to *make* him king. They wanted more of the same power they’d come to believe is the only power in the world. But he fled from them. They did not know the truth. Not all who ate the bread were followers. In fact, most did not understand that the bread was a sign of who Jesus was. To know the truth is to look at where the sign is pointing. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ signs point to a particular kind of God and a particular kind of power.

The power that Jesus pointed to was unlike the power of the emperor, which leads to more darkness and violence. Instead of amassing power and retaining power by violence, Jesus takes upon him the violence of human power in order to defeat its seduction by his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In a baffling inversion of the way the world was, Jesus’ crucifixion was his coronation. That is why a sign was written on his cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” To people it was ironic, but not to God.

The night before Jesus died he gave his disciples a new commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” They would not understand how to love until they

see the events of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, though. If they tried to love with just what they could muster within them, their love would always be distorted. But this love that Jesus was talking about was about imitating him—in his self-giving, in the way his rejection of the powers that corrupt the children of God and in his trust in God that death is not the last word.

When I was searching for a “Christ the King” image for the bulletin cover, I came upon an image of Jesus who obviously spent many hours in the gym and some time in the tan parlor. He had a six pack of abs and bulging muscles. He was holding a sword, wearing a cape and donning a big shiny crown. This is what we call an anti-sign. Anyone who wants this kind of Jesus just wants more of the same that this world offers. There’s nothing of the gospel in it. The crown that Jesus wore is a crown of thorns. It will always be his crown. When we imagine that Jesus’ resurrection means that he finally comes into the kind of power that he rejected, it means that we are still intoxicated with the powers of the world.

When the resurrected Jesus came back upon the living, he didn’t clean-house. Instead, he passed into houses of fear and through locked doors, to declare, “Peace. My peace I give to you. As the Father has sent me, so now I send you.” These are some of Jesus’ last words to us. He told Pilate that his followers hear his voice and they listen to him. How might you listen to these words on this Christ the King Sunday? What is the Truth?