

Proper 29 2006

2 Sam

Ps 93

Rev 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

Christ the King Sunday

Today is the last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next Sunday is Advent 1 beginning a new lectionary year C that features Luke as the Gospel. As with most high holy days, the gospel for years A B and C comes from John as it does today. The festival of Christ the King is of recent Roman Catholic origin. Pope Pius XI in 1925 set the new feast day on the last Sunday of October chiefly in view of the coming feast of All Saints, then they moved it in 1969 to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, the “final Lord’s Day”. The festival became part of the uniting movement as denominations adopted the Revised Common Lectionary. The “green” season of Pentecost began with the “white” festival of the Holy Trinity and ends with the white festival of Christ the King. The other “green” season, Epiphany also begins and ends with “white festivals”, the Baptism of our Lord and the Transfiguration of our Lord.

The passage from John asks plainly, are you the king of the Jews? It is part of the dialectic between Pilate and Jesus and the question whether or not Jesus is the king of the Jews is asked in all four gospels. The fact that in all the narratives Pilate phrases the issue as “Are you the King of the Jews?” suggests that when the Jewish leaders were not able to convict Jesus on the grounds of disobedience to Jewish law and custom, the charge became one of political overtone, one which the Roman governor, Pilate would have an interest in investigating. The title, “King of the Jews” is spoken by nonJews more often than by Jews. This observation from the use of the title in the gospels suggests a political motive. We should understand that to the Johannine author the “Jews” represent people and authorities that were anti-Jesus and anti-Christian. Nearly all of the disciples were ethnically Jews. It is clear that Pilate wants to make it clear that Jesus is not his king and the ones who have conspired to bring Jesus to trial are Jews, hence the connection. Pilate represents the world and Jesus represents God,

the transcendent one incarnate in flesh. The exchange is both ironic and tragic. Pilate asks questions that reveal his limited understanding, such as “what is truth” and Jesus rephrases the question as “who is truth” in the way he answers, “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” and earlier in the bread of life discourse, Jesus has declared “I am the truth” (John 14:6).

Who is your King? Who is your Lord? Revelation was written when the Roman Emperor Domitian required all citizens at least once a year to bow down and worship him, calling upon him as “god and lord”. Christians who worship only one God and Lord could not do that. Thus, Who is your King, was a test question of loyalty. For Pilate and “the Jews” it is Jesus or Caesar?

Kings in the ancient world were responsible for peace and prosperity, security and abundance. In the US, we might want our government to provide peace and security, but we tend to rely on individual efforts for prosperity and abundance. So how do we talk about the power and authority of Jesus in ways that each of us can understand?

The question is what is our source of authority, of power, of truth, and how do we know if we are on the right path? The Church in its formation of creeds and confessions forgot the Word of our Gospel that He is the Truth and claimed instead doctrines, dogmas, about him that however necessary and good they were, proved to be not the truth that sets us free. The truth liberates according to Jesus: You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. How do we reach this truth? “By doing it” is the answer of the Fourth Gospel. Obeying the commandments, accepting and fulfilling them is not enough. Doing truth means living out of the reality which is He who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and our world. How? “By remaining in Him”: Abide in me and I in you” he says. The truth which liberates is the truth in which we participate, which is a part of us and we a part of it. True discipleship is participation. If the real, the ultimate, the divine reality is His being, becomes our being, we are in the truth that matters.

How? “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” Being of the truth means coming from the true, being determined by the divine ground of all being, the reality that is in Christ. If we have part in it, we recognize it wherever it appears; we recognize it as it appears in its fullness in the Christ.

If you seriously ask the question, “Am I of the truth?” you are of the truth. If you do not ask it seriously, you do not really want to know or be in search of truth and you would not hear the answer. The one who seeks the truth is liberated from the bondage of dogmatic self-assurance from the despair of feeling estranged from the holy, or from inertia over details and is on the path of truth. On this road you will meet the liberating truth in many forms. You will never learn it in formulas, quotations, rules, or other propositions you can learn, write down, and take home. You will encounter it in books, conversations, lectures, or even sermons. You may hear a word, a phrase, a description, a story that speaks to your heart – listen. Truth like a brilliant dawn after a very dark night has a way of penetrating and capturing our attention. In some cases truth appears like a landscape when the fog becomes thinner and thinner and finally disappears. New darkneses and new fogs may fall on you, but you have experienced, the truth and freedom given by the truth and will be able to grasp it in new forms, situations, and encounters. Truth can be grasped in transitions, in encounters with others, in friendship and estrangement, in love, in difference, in sudden insight hidden in your soul, in reconciliation, and acceptance of yourself.

There is no law that says the One who is Truth cannot grasp you. Many have encountered the truth that is in God, even if they had never seen Him who is the Truth. Christians in all generations, have no guarantee that they participate in the truth, which He is unless they allow Him to direct and live in and through them. Holding fast to the very ground of all life, the communion of all life with the Creator, united in love with God above and neighbors on the left and on the right, we can know the center which is truth. The truth that liberates is the power of love because God is love. You will know the truth has taken hold of you only when love has taken hold of you and has started to free you from yourselves.

Because Pilate did not understand who Jesus was, the questions he asked did not lead him further. Pilate was satisfied that whoever Jesus might be, he was of no consequence to the power of Rome or to his work as Governor of Judea. Calling Jesus King of the Jews was no more and no less than an insult to the Jews. Relief must have swept over Pilate as he received the assurance that whatever power or authority Jesus possessed was not of this world. Wrong on both counts, too weak to follow his intuition that Jesus was innocent, Pilate issued the order to crucify Jesus, setting in motion a series of actions that would change the world and reveal the true identity of Jesus. The one whose title read, King of the Jews, would die on the cross, be buried but 3 days later would rise triumphant over sin and death. The strongest rock would not seal pure love in a tomb. Love would rise, return to assure the disciples that the world of the Kingdom of God is ongoing, here, in time, on earth, and will continue through the efforts of all members of the Body of Christ.

The Kingdom of God is very much in the world in the person of Jesus, in the Body of Christ, as it promotes peace and justice. We are freed from fear of worldly authority because our source of Truth, our place within the body is to live as we are loved, to work for peace and justice in all times and places. Love sets us free so that we can serve the Kingdom of God as the Spirit directs. Abiding in the one truth, we are changed into disciples, transformed into loving forgiving persons whose kingdom is also not of this world, but whose duty is to pursue the ideal character of the kingdom of truth. The Kingdom of God is relevant to every moment of history as an ideal possibility and as a principle of judgment upon present realities. Sometimes obeying God means being in defiance of the world, and sometimes the kingdom must be mixed with the forces of nature, which operate in the world. Without being centered in the One Truth, we risk allowing the vision of the Kingdom of God revealed in Christ to become a luxury of those who can afford to acquiesce in present injustice because we do not suffer from it. Those who are of the Truth hears the voice of Christ guiding them to correct injustice, to pursue peace, and to live according to the law of love. Thus we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."