



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 24, 2024
DANIEL 7:9-10,13-14; PSALM 93; REVELATION 1:4b-8; JOHN 18:33-37

WHAT IS THE TRUTH ANYWAY?

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.”]*

I suspect some of us are still attempting to adjust to the outcome of our recent election. Many are still bewildered and grieving. Some are celebrating, even in our faith community. I have been doing my own inner work of adjusting to a new reality and I have been thinking a lot about “kings” on this Christ the King Sunday, especially as my phone has been blowing up with texts like the following: “Please sign the petition ‘No Kings Act’ to strip Trump and future presidents of immunity.”

These texts were so frequent and intrusive, that I finally responded “STOP.” They haven’t stopped and now my email box is full of similar messages.

Christ the King is a strange Christian feast. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are replete with images about the sovereignty of God, but the liturgical celebration of Christ the King is rather new to the liturgical calendar. It began in 1925 through an act of Pope Pius XI in the aftermath of

WWI and the numerous revolutions that had caused the fall of monarchical dynasties. The Pope was concerned about rampant social unrest, increasing secularism, the marginalization of religion, ultra-nationalism and the beginnings of fascism he was seeing throughout the world. He reminded us that empires and dynasties rise and fall but the reign of Christ is eternal. Furthermore, he enjoined the faithful to seek "the Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ."ⁱ I find the parallels to our current sociopolitical environment to be staggering. Maybe it is good for us to reflect upon the notion of "Christ, King of the Universe"ⁱⁱ in our current day. But rather than spending the next 7 minutes on the feast itself, I must explore the image of Christ the King we are given in our Gospel today.

Let's talk about TRUTH. Truth is a major character in our Gospel reading. Jesus dodges the question from Pilate about being a king by stating that his mission is to "testify to the truth." Unfortunately, our reading today omits the next line. Pilate responds by asking, "what is truth?" ***What is truth?*** At this point, it has become a cliché to say we live in a "post-truth" era. Whether we're talking about politics,

climate change, critical race theory, or the eating of pets in Springfield, Ohio a quick Google search will yield zingers like, "The Death of Truth," "The Assault on Truth," and "Living in Our Post-Truth World." If we learned anything from this last election season, it's that we are steeped in a culture of blatant lies, sly exaggerations, AI doctored images, wild conspiracy theories, and fake news. Objective facts, for all intents and purposes, no longer exist or matter.

Unlike our first two readings where God is sitting on a fiery throne or Christ is descending from the heavens on a cloud, the Gospel of John offers us a picture of Jesus at his physical and emotional worst: arrested, disheveled, harassed, abandoned—and standing before the notoriously cruel Pontius Pilate for questioning. This week, our king is an arrested, falsely accused criminal. A dead man walking. His chosen path to glory is humility, surrender, brokenness, and loss.

But what does any of this have to do with our current crisis of truth and untruth? Consider the exchange that takes place between Jesus and Pilate. There is a back and forth about Jesus' kingship, where his kingdom might be located, and what Jesus' mission is. As

I mentioned earlier, it ends with Pilate's question, "*What is truth?*" Jesus doesn't respond. That is, he doesn't respond *with words*. He doesn't engage Pilate in a philosophical dialogue. Instead, he embodies his reply with the whole of his life: "You're looking at it," his silence implies. "*You're looking at the truth. I am the truth.*" In other words, truth isn't an instrument, a weapon, or a slogan we can smack on a refrigerator magnet. The truth is Jesus. The life of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the love of Jesus. He himself is truth's most complete and complex embodiment. He is Truth incarnate.

What does it mean, in our post-truth era, to worship the King of Truth? What does it mean to "belong to the truth" in a culture that increasingly denies truth's validity? Perhaps most importantly, how can we bear witness to embodied truth, complex truth, in a world that prefers memes, soundbites, Tweets, and clever New Yorker cartoons?

As I reflect on this Gospel passage, it seems to me that one of the most urgent tasks facing the church on this "Christ the King" Sunday is forging a robust, urgent, gracious, and trustworthy relationship to the truth. If Jesus came to testify to the truth, if he

is the truth, if he is the *king* of truth, then what do we, his subjects, owe our king? What does loyalty to truth look like?

Well, if truth is king, then "fake news" is not. If truth is king, then self-deception is not. If truth is king, then lazy relativism is not. If truth is king, then distorting inconvenient facts for our own political, religious, or economic comfort, is not.

Even as I type these words, I'm aware of the church's long and shameful tradition of using "the truth" to consolidate and abuse its own power. Too often, we have excelled at using "truth" to colonize, enslave, reject, and dehumanize those we conveniently call our "Others."

But that's not the kind of truth Jesus calls us to belong to. The truth he embodies in his life, death, and resurrection is not instrumental or self-aggrandizing in any way. It does not serve to bolster his own power and authority. Quite the opposite—it humbles him. It empties him. Living the truth takes away his life.

As far as I can tell, Jesus doesn't privilege any version of truth that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. He doesn't secure his

own prosperity at the expense of other people's suffering. He doesn't allow holy ends to justify debased means. He doesn't make honesty optional when the truth strikes him as inconvenient. And he never aligns himself with brute, dishonest power to guarantee his own success.

This is our king. Can we stand for the truth as he does? Can we tell and keep telling the beautiful, hard, joy-filled, pain-filled, and powerfully undeniable stories we know to be true about this Jesus, this Gospel Jesus whose very identity is truth, and whose best expression of power is surrender?

Next Sunday we will enter into Advent, a season of waiting, longing, and listening. Soon we will walk into the expectant darkness, waiting for the light to dawn, for the truth to reveal itself, for the first cries of a vulnerable baby to redefine kingship, authority, and power forever. Yes, we have good reasons to fear the erosion of truth. But we are not a people bereft of hope. The king who reigns will not abandon us. Truth will survive; it has died and returned to life already. The truth lives. And we belong to him.

ⁱ Pope Pius XI (11 December 1925). "[Quas primas](#)". Libreria Editrice Vaticana, as found on [Quas Primas \(December 11, 1925\) | PIUS XI](#).

ⁱⁱ This is the formal title of the feast day as amended by Pope Paul VI in his *motu proprio Mysteriorum Paschalis* (1969), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19690214_mysterii-paschalis.html.



SAINT MARK'S
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