

Christ The King – Last Pent B

“Lo! who comes with clouds descending; every eye will see, even those who crucified; and because of God, all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.” This is the Feast of Christ the King. That announcement is as puzzling as it is glorious. For us, the idea of a king is a mixed up one to say the least.

For the people of Israel, the concept of kingship was foundational. The inauguration of a monarchy under Samuel was a great stride in the history of the Hebrew people. After a bit of a false start with Saul and his son, Samuel anoints David, the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel. We heard David’s Oracle, his last words: “The spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. The Rock of Israel says: ‘One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.’ But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away.” But by Jesus’ time, the King of Israel was a missing dream, a dim fantasy amongst a people under the merciless rule of Rome.

The only apparent means of survival were to appease the Romans and manipulate their systems for personal power and gain. Thus when Jesus appears, representing and advocating a return to God’s rule, the temple authorities turn themselves inside out to try to get rid of him. They took Jesus to Pilate’s headquarters early in the morning. They themselves did not enter, so as to avoid

ritual defilement. But Pilate called their bluff: “What is this man accused of?” They are too confused by their fears and self-righteous anger. How desperately ashamed must they be to answer: “Well, if he weren’t a criminal, we wouldn’t have arrested him, now would we?” They could hardly say, ‘We don’t like the truth he represents, so we want to get rid of him.’ But that’s what was going on.

Societies are still chillingly prone to incarcerating, expelling and eliminating people whose existence makes us uncomfortable. John’s Gospel talks a lot about “The Jews said this,” and “The Jews did that.” It would have been a great deal more helpful if John had written, as did Mark, “The leaders said this,” and “The crowds did that,” After all, Rule 1 when we the Bible is to remember: “Jews-R-Us.”

Inayat Khan observes: “This state of things has existed in all ages. Blinded by conventions and by the laws of his time and the customs of his people, man has ignored and opposed the truth. Yet at the same time the truth has never failed to make its impression upon the soul, because the soul of all is one soul, and truth is one truth under whatever religion it is hidden.” The weakness of mankind has been that only what he is accustomed to consider as truth he takes to be truth, and anything he has not been accustomed to hear or think frightens him. Just like a person in a strange land, away from home, the soul is a stranger to the nature of things it is not accustomed to. But the journey to perfection means rising above limitations, rising so high that not only the horizon of one country, of one continent, is seen, but that of the whole world. The higher we rise, the wider becomes the horizon of our view.”

Pilate won't go along with them. "He's one of your people, take him yourselves and deal with him according to your own justice." "But, but, but we're not permitted to put anyone to death." You can almost hear the silence hanging in the air. "So, let me get this straight, you want me to do it for you instead?"

"We can't kill anybody," they say. "It's against our religion. But yes, we sure do wish you would do it for us, Mr. Pilate." I don't recall ever hearing anyone describe Pontius Pilate as a role model, but he does set one thinking for a moment when he asks, "What is truth." At first we hear it as a flippant, cruel and highly inappropriate remark with someone's life at stake. But it's actually a good question, one that we could stand to ask ourselves more often. And Jesus himself asks the same thing in another way: "Who do you say that I am?" In other words, "Do you get it? Do you get who I am? I am what I am. I am truth – whatever you say I am, that's your truth."

Jesus is very reluctant to call himself a King. To the question, "Are you a king?" he answers, "You say so," and "My kingdom is not of this world." He doesn't sound as if he's trying to prove a powerful point; he doesn't say, "You're darn right I'm a King...I am the King." The kingdom he describes has pretty open borders. It's available to anybody, and the prevailing attitude seems to be one of humility, not triumph.

Jesus' worldly reign was brief. He was born in a cow shed and rode to his coronation on a burro. Wearing his crown was physical torture. His sayings are difficult to understand, often downright exasperating: The last shall be

first; Turn the other cheek; If someone asks for your coat, give them also your cloak. His ideas are what you might call extravagantly counter-instinctive. You'd have to be a fool to follow this advice.

But we have come to realize that God's foolishness is a better beacon than human wisdom. We have observed that coming to God as little children – even though it might be a little foolishly – is what goodness requires. So we seek to follow this very different kind of king and ourselves become fools for love.

This can be especially hard for us modern Americans. Our nation was founded on the renunciation of kingship, and we tend to be reluctant, even cynical about letting someone outside ourselves care for us and tell us how to behave. We tend to be dissatisfied with the why and wherefore of ideas. We withhold our commitments, to each other, to our communities, and to the well-being of other nations and the planet as a whole until we determine the exact benefit to ourselves. But exact benefits can never be determined; which means we withhold a lot.

The answer to Pilate's question, 'What is truth?' is actually available in this: No one has been shown to fail who has followed this king Christ, whose only royal commandment is: "Commit to love first, ask questions later." The only unredeemable thing is to deny the spirit of unconditional love. Today is the day we prepare to begin another year by declaring our allegiance to this very different king with his very different kind of power.

It is a kingdom like no other – one no human beings have experienced or even well-imagined – but we do have the necessary instructions. And we have the age old promise: “Heed me and walk in my ways; at once I will turn my hand against your enemies, and fill your mouth with honey from the rock!” Jesus God’s-self is the description, the user manual for this strange, revolutionary kingdom of which we would be part. But the precepts and parables all demand our attention, our interpretation and our acceptance in order to make sense and be put into action. It is a kingdom of God’s making, but very much of our doing.

Grace to you and peace from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and made us to be a kingdom ourselves, serving God, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.