

November 22, 2009

2 Samuel 23:1-5
John 18:33-37

“Belonging to the Truth”

The Church has a calendar that is different from our secular calendar. The secular calendar’s new year begins on Jan. 1st. The Church calendar begins on the first Sunday of Advent, which we will observe next Sunday. We begin to prepare for the coming of Christ into the world. Through the church year we celebrate Christ’s birth, his ministry, we remember his death on the cross and celebrate Easter. We remember how the church was born, and celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. We hear the call to become followers of Christ and eventually come to the culmination of the church year, which we have reached today!! This is Christ the King Sunday, when we proclaim and celebrate that Christ is the Ruler of the Universe, with power and might far beyond any other power.

On this Christ the King Sunday, the lectionary gives us a conversation between Jesus and Pilate, following Christ’s betrayal and arrest. Pilate is reluctant to get involved in this “Jewish squabble”, in which Jesus has been accused of profound blasphemy by his own people: claiming that he is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah. Pilate is a Roman ruler, and really doesn’t care at all about that particular issue.

So, he begins to ask Jesus questions, hoping to pin him down about his claims. If Pilate can get Jesus to admit to claiming he’s a “king” of some kind, that would give Pilate an easy end to the mess. Christ’s claim would constitute treason against the Roman emperor, which would require an immediate death sentence for Jesus.

Pilate’s first question gets right to the point: “Are you the King of the Jews?” But Jesus does not co-operate. Throughout the interview he answers Pilate’s questions with more questions. His reply here: “Do you ask this on your own?” challenges Pilate, underscoring the fact that Pilate has no evidence against him, but only the hearsay evidence of what the Jewish leaders have told him.

Pilate replies with contempt: “I am not a Jew, am I?” As an important Roman citizen he has little interest in the concerns of the bothersome, insignificant Jewish inhabitants of the land. Only the suggestion that Jesus’

words may be treasonous against Rome has forced him to ask the next question: “What have you done?”

Jesus’ next words do not answer Pilate directly. Instead he describes the nature of his kingdom. The fact that Jesus claims he HAS a kingdom implies a claim of kingship, but Jesus doesn’t name this specifically. Instead he begins to describe his kingdom, and the description clearly does not conform to any Roman understanding of the term. Jesus’ kingdom “is not from this world... not from here.” As evidence Jesus points out that he has no soldiers, no armies, no lawyers fighting for his freedom.

Pilate’s response reveals how desperately he’s trying to avoid intricate debate. “So, you are a king?” he asks. If Jesus has a kingdom, he must be a king.

Jesus refuses to give Pilate what he’s after, by saying he is, indeed, a king. Instead he says, ‘YOU say that I am a king.’

He then explains he came into the world to bring TRUTH to all. Pilate, disgusted with his inability to get a straight answer from Jesus, scoffs, “What IS truth?”

The conversation has been a series of statements that never seem to connect. Pilate wants to talk about kingship, and Jesus insists on talking about truth.

Truth for the Greeks and Romans was an intellectual proposition. It was something to be stated, to be described, explained, understood, believed.

In the Hebrew culture of Jesus, there was no such thing as a separate intellect. Mind, body, emotions were understood to be inextricably bound together. In Hebrew, the word “truth” is more descriptive of a person--- a trustworthy person, a faithful person---- than an idea.

We are more like the Romans than the Hebrews, in my view. In the Biblical record Jesus states, “I am the TRUTH, the WAY and the LIFE.

We, thinking in a Greco-Roman way, say, “THAT’S TRUE!!!” It’s a statement that is true and I believe it!”

But on this Christ the King Sunday I want to suggest that's not what Jesus desires from us at all. Christ calls us to BELONG TO THE TRUTH. You can't really belong to an idea, can you? Jesus calls us to belong to the truth. To embrace TRUTH, we embrace a relationship with Christ.

That's what this day is about—it's not just a day for us to proclaim that Christ is the Ruler of the Universe, although we do believe that. It's not just a day for us to proclaim that Christ is more powerful than any earthly ruler or force, although we do believe that. It's not just a day for us to say Christ will triumph over all sin and death and reign in justice, mercy and equity one day, although we do believe that.

Today we are called to embrace a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As we do this, we BELONG TO THE TRUTH, because we belong to Jesus Christ, who is himself—THE TRUTH ABOVE ALL TRUTHS.

Jesus himself tells us HOW TO DO THIS: "Listen to my voice."

When Christ is our Sovereign, we embrace a relationship with him. When Christ is our Sovereign, we belong to the TRUTH. When Christ is our Sovereign, we LISTEN TO HIS VOICE.

There are two major messages that come to us through the voice of Jesus Christ in our sacred writings which we can celebrate today.

When we BELONG to CHRIST our Sovereign:

First: We know who we are. We are Christ's own. We are royal subjects.

Not so long ago, a group of people came to this country. They managed to get jobs working in a factory. They wanted to begin a new life, a good life. But they found things more difficult than they had expected. They spoke English just fine, although their accent was different. But they had a problem that led some folks to be less than welcoming, less than cordial. These people were from Jamaica, and their skin was black. They repeatedly encountered situations where they were not treated with respect, where they were victims of the racism that is woven into our society and heritage.

You know what these people did? When they were being demeaned or insulted or treated disrespectfully, they drew themselves up to their full

height and with quiet dignity stated, “I don’t believe you know who I am. I am a SUBJECT of the QUEEN.”

These people, in their historical and political ties to Great Britain, in their identity as “subjects of the Queen” carried a sense of their value and worth into a situation that was blind to that reality. This gave them strength and protection at a time when they needed it.

As followers of Christ, we are subjects of our King, our Sovereign Lord. We listen to his voice which tells us we are not just his servants, we are his FRIENDS. No matter who would demean us, seek to humiliate us, harm or ridicule us, we are protected by this inner knowing of our worth. We belong to the TRUTH; we are subjects of the King, who calls us his friends.

When we BELONG to CHRIST our Sovereign:

Second: We know our priorities and values. These are not the priorities and values of THIS world. We belong to the truth.

Does this mean we burn people at the stake who don’t share our ideas? Do we stretch them on the rack, tie stones to them and throw them in the river, lock them in stocks so we can spit and mock and ridicule?

We aren’t really tempted to do any of THOSE things.

But we are tempted to condescend to others in subtle ways. We need to listen to Christ’s voice that calls us to embrace and live out HIS priorities and values. In the business world, profit will not be our god. In our families, being the “boss” or “knowing best” will be seen as irrelevant or ridiculous. In the use of our time, talents and treasures, we will listen for JESUS’ voice above all the others clamoring for their share of all of these.

What is belonging to the truth? Embracing a relationship with Jesus, the Truth, the Way, the Life. Belonging to the truth—how do we do this? The ones who belong to the truth LISTEN. They don’t TALK so much. They LISTEN. They listen to Christ’s voice. They don’t burn, torture, ridicule. They don’t condescend. They LISTEN.

We go forth today with this call. We know we have great value and worth and are subjects of our sovereign, who claims us as his friends. We know

our priorities and values, that come to us through Christ's voice recorded in Scripture and through the Holy Spirit's voice in our hearts.

I'd like to offer us a challenge today. Before we gather again for worship in this Sanctuary, we will have eaten a Thanksgiving meal. I'd like us to do something new at that meal this year. Ask each person at the table to thank God for one thing, AND TO PROMISE God one way he or she will SERVE Christ our Sovereign in this coming year. Let's remember to LISTEN FOR CHRIST'S VOICE in every day—especially on the day we give thanks. AMEN!