

Sermon Proper 29 Year B, Christ the King Sunday; John 18: 33-37

*“Come Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. Open our hearts and our minds to know you. Amen.”*

### **The Truth of Christ**

Today is a special Sunday. If you look at the church calendar you'll find that today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, and also the Sunday before Advent, and therefore the last Sunday of the church year. It is called Christ the King Sunday because the readings speak of the kingdom of God, and the reign of Christ. It is a relatively recent feast for the church: Pope Pius XI added it to the Roman Catholic Church's calendar in 1925, as a way of affirming the sovereignty of Christ in the midst of a troubled world. Perhaps it may have some special relevance for us in the midst of our troubled world today? We shall see. But I have a problem with the name chosen for this Sunday. I don't like the word "King" for the Christ Jesus. As we know throughout world history this image of king or sovereign is a mixed bag isn't it? For some it conveys positive attributes of a leader who brings about justice and provides for the well-being of those under the his authority. For others this image of king is spoiled by the abuse and exploitation practiced by the many unjust rulers and dictators throughout the ages, and the patriarchal tyranny of male domination. An even bigger objection I have to describing Jesus as a king is that Jesus never referred to himself as king. Yes, he often speaks about the Kingdom of God, but that kingdom is unlike any earthly kingdom. It is one of servanthood, of love of neighbor, of caring for the resident alien,—in today's language the immigrant—of mercy and justice, of compassion, of peace. It has nothing to do with power and control of one over another. No, Jesus never calls himself a king. He does, however, call himself a lot of other things in John's gospel. There are seven "I am" sayings of Jesus in John. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the gate." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the true vine." And the seventh, which has special relevance for our gospel reading today, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the truth," Jesus says. In today's

reading, in his trial before Pilate, Jesus is being interrogated by Pilate, who says to him “So you are a king?” Jesus answers him “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.” Pilate dismissively replies, “What is truth?” Kind of reminds me of those many voices among us today who have lost sight about facts and truth, doesn’t it? But more on that in a minute. In response to Pilate’s question “What is truth?” Jesus does not answer. He just stands there, as if to say “You are looking at the truth!” So, what is this truth Jesus is talking about? We see it again when Jesus tells his disciples that when he leaves them the Father will give them another Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. “This is the Spirit of truth,” he says, “whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14: 16-17)

Let’s talk about truth. We are now, and over these past several years more than at any time I can remember, living in a culture where facts and ultimately the truth have lost their meaning, their significance. We all remember a time when telling the truth was considered not only important, but was also a reflection of one’s character, one’s honor, one’s dignity, one’s authority. For most of us being honest, telling the truth, and not cheating are part of the foundation of good character. We don’t have to look hard to find what the Bible says about it: the 9th of the 10 commandments given to Moses says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” It’s nothing new. So, what has happened in our society? How did America get to the place where speaking the truth has lost its importance, where it is acceptable to spin or deny facts and outright lie in order to save face or to advance a political agenda? The comments made and the lies told during the recent presidential campaign were ridiculous, outright lies repeated over and over again. They were offensive, even embarrassing. And most people don’t seem to care if something said is true or not. There were fact checkers during the presidential debate and many other occasions who found

dozens of outright lies. It's as if our political leaders believe not only that facts are irrelevant, but worse that it's OK to intentionally lie to misinform people in order to get elected. The end somehow justifies the means? I remember someone actually saying that there is no real truth, and that facts are in the eyes of the beholder! No, being honest is not the goal. The goal is staying in power. We live in the midst of this alternative reality where facts and truth are not only relative but unimportant. Of course Jesus' words about being the truth mean more than just not telling lies, but disregard for facts and truth is a symptom of a deeper malady. It is a symptom of a hunger for power and self image that transcends everything, even truth itself. In his book Beyond Words, in his meditation on the word "lying" Frederick Buechner says that perhaps nothing so marks us as human as the gift of speech. We abuse that gift when we tell lies. He says that what makes lying evil is not only that the world is deceived by it but that we are dehumanized by it. So what do we do? How can we restore sanity?

I want to leave the world of politics for now, and get into something theological. Let's get back to what Jesus said to Pilate. What Jesus means by "belonging to the truth" is to recognize in Jesus the truth of God, to see the fullness of God revealed in Jesus, and to hear the words of God in Jesus' voice. He is saying that yes indeed there is God. There is this ultimate reality. There is a truth that transcends everything. Jesus is himself that truth of God, incarnated as a human being, telling Pilate and telling us what this God is like. Jesus is here to testify to that Truth. God is this Spirit of Truth which is present everywhere, somewhere deep within all of us. Unfortunately he also says that Pilate and the world he represents don't see it. C.S. Lewis gets at this idea of truth when in chapter 1 of his book Mere Christianity he writes about "The Law of Human Nature." Why is he exploring this line of thinking? He says "I am trying to find out truth." He says that there seems to be some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality—of knowing right from wrong—that is a part of human nature. He says this law of human nature is not unique to one culture or

one religion, but is present as moral teachings within all cultures and religions. All of humanity, he says, at some very deep and foundational level knows the difference between right and wrong. However, unlike other laws of nature, such as gravity for instance, man can choose either to obey or disobey it. Unfortunately, he says—and we know—that most people do not actually keep the law. I will go a step further and suggest that this Law of Human Nature is part of the Christ within each of us. It is part of the truth of God that Jesus is telling Pilate about.

I am fully aware that the outcome of the presidential election pleased some people and disappointed others. Cynthia and I were on the losing side, and we had a difficult time watching the election returns, and during the weeks that have followed. Where do we go now, we asked? During a prayerful meditation a few days after the election, I think I received an answer to that question. What I received was a reminder of what I already knew but tend to forget: that we cannot now and really have never been able to fully depend upon or put our faith in our national leaders or our system of government to carry out what we perceive to be the truth of Christ's words and life, as we see them in the gospel. What we do have, however—what we can hold onto and follow—is the light and truth of the Christ still alive and shining in the darkness, and nothing can snuff it out. It is right there in Jesus' words in the gospels, including this: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matt. 25: 34-36) And this message which is present throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: love and care for our neighbor, including the least of those among us, including the orphans, the widows, the poor, and the resident aliens—the immigrants. That is the gospel. It is eternally true. We have that to guide us

through whatever we might encounter. This awareness I received actually deepened my faith, and helped lead me out of disappointment and despair into hope and possibility. As followers of the Christ we can see and become one with this Spirit of Truth, and we can follow it. Our prayer is that our leaders will seek the way and see the light and find the truth of Christ as seen in the words and actions of Jesus in the gospel. That is the truth Jesus is talking about.