

Kingdom and Truth

John 18:33-37

November 22, 2009

I.

Today's reading might suggest that somehow we are out of sequence. Good Friday and Easter don't come until next April. And yet, we just heard a conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate that took place a few hours before the crucifixion.

And today also is the last Sunday in Pentecost, which means it's the last Sunday in the church year. Advent begins next Sunday and then we can wish each other a Happy New Year, at least in a religious sense.

And next Sunday, as we begin the new church year, we will hear about Jesus Christ coming in the clouds in power and glory at some unknown future time to finally establish God's kingdom on earth. We start with Jesus' second coming rather than his birth.

So, what's going on here? What is there about these readings that causes us to ignore the usual chronology of things? The answer has two parts.

First, our normal calendar year is based on the earth's movement around the sun. The church year, however, has nothing to do with the sun. Instead, it reflects the history of our faith. This should not surprise us. Spiritual things often differ from worldly things.

Second, and more importantly, our spiritual focus is changing. Now our Sunday readings start to emphasize the meaning of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior rather than his work as the disciples' teacher.

Today marks that transition. This Sunday is celebrated throughout the church as Christ the King Sunday. All our readings reflect this theme of Christ's eternal sovereignty over all things.

II.

And the Gospel reading from John ties it together. Jesus was standing before Pilate on the morning of what now is Good Friday. He had been arrested by Roman soldiers the night before, and dubiously was charged with blasphemy by Jewish leaders in a bogus midnight trial.

Jesus had been awake all night, had been abused, and probably looked like he had been through the wringer. And yet Pilate asked if he was king of the Jews. Jesus probably did not appear to be much of a king by Pilate's standards, but Pilate had to be sure Jesus was not a trouble maker.

This was because Pilate's greatest fear was a Jewish insurrection. Jewish rebels and zealots had been causing trouble for years by resisting Roman rule, and Pilate wanted to find out whether or not Jesus was a security threat. He was concerned that Jesus might be some sort of political leader who could challenge Roman power.

Jesus apparently satisfied Pilate's concerns. He acknowledged he was a king but said his kingdom was not of this world. He pointed out that he did not resist Roman authority and his supporters made no effort to prevent him from being arrested the previous night. Then he said that he came to reveal truth that only could be known by those who accepted him as their king.

Pilate, however, was focused on his own situation and governing the unrest in Jerusalem. Once he saw that Jesus was not a threat, he lost interest. He washed his hands of the matter, so to speak. He was concerned about whether there would be riots that day, and notions of Jesus as king in a heavenly kingdom revealing eternal truths held little interest for him.

But we have an advantage over Pontius Pilate. We know what happened. We have the benefit of two thousand years of hindsight and history. And we can, if we choose, understand and accept what it means to have Christ as our king and the revealer of truth. Let's look these ideas.

III.

When Jesus stood before Pilate and said that his kingdom was not of this world, he proclaimed that through him God's heavenly kingdom had come to earth. And he also identified himself as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. We heard in the reading from Daniel today that the Son of Man would be given everlasting power and dominion, and his kingdom would not pass away.

That's quite a statement. Do people believe it? Who do most people think Jesus is, really? Is he the King of kings and Lord of lords as the Collect described him, or is he something else?

For openers, I think we can say that Jesus was not crucified because he was just suggesting a few changes here and a few changes there. He was not just urging us to be nicer to each other. Instead he proclaimed the coming of an entirely new spiritual order. And he threatened the existence of earthly institutions with heavenly truths.

All four Gospels, for example, show that he acknowledged his messianic role for humanity, and claimed a unique relationship with God. He took it upon himself to forgive the sins of others, and described himself as the Son of Man, which people of the time understood as a divine title.

In addition, he made exceptional claims about himself elsewhere in John's Gospel. He said I am the bread of life (6:35) and the light of the world (8:12). I am the gate for the sheep (10:7-9), and the good shepherd (10:11-14). I am the resurrection (11:23-25). I am the way, and the truth, and the life (14:5-6), and I am the vine that gives life (15: 1, 5).

Then, on top of that, when we consider that he raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons, we have a picture of an extremely unique person, all of which leads to an inescapable reality. And that reality is that that Jesus is the Son of God. We simply cannot regard him as a respected teacher or as a good man, and nothing more. He does not give us that option.

I have mentioned how C.S. Lewis made this point in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. He said that if Jesus were merely human he would have been regarded as egocentric, arrogant, or a fool. No mortal person could make the astonishing claims that Jesus made, and say the shocking things that he said, and then get away with just being called a respected teacher or a good man.

And I would suggest that as much as people might search for it, there is no neutral position. There is no fence upon which we can sit. Jesus is either the Son of God or he was a fraud. He cannot have been merely a distinguished or respected person by worldly standards.

We actually have three choices. We can believe Jesus thought he was the Son of God but was mistaken, or we can believe he knew he was not the Son of God but claimed to be anyway, or we can believe that Jesus truly is who he says he is.

Let's look at these choices. What if Jesus was mistaken? What if he actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not. Well, history unfortunately has had its share of people who believed they were gods, and no one ever thought they were respected teachers or good men.

Or what if Jesus was a deceiver? What if he knew that he was not God, yet intentionally said he was so that he could gain a following. Well, if this is true, if Jesus did mislead us, then we as Christians would be a gullible and pathetic bunch of people. Again, that hardly is the legacy of a respected teacher or good man.

So, unless we reject everything we know about Jesus, the inescapable conclusion is that he is who he said he is. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. He is king of our lives, and his kingdom comes from God. And as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, we do so knowing that our faith is grounded in the truth.

IV.

This leads to the other point Jesus made. He said that he came into the world to proclaim the truth, and that everyone who knows the truth believes in him. And at times we probably ask ourselves, just as Pilate asked Jesus at the end of today's reading, "What is truth?"

In answering that question we obviously distinguish between permanent truths and passing truths. We know, for example, that the Pittsburgh Steelers are the current Super Bowl champions. That is truth, but it probably will change next February. And twenty five years ago most people immediately would have said that "spam" was a type of processed meat. That also has changed.

Jesus, however, was speaking of the eternal unchanging truth. He was referring to the truth of God in creation, the truth of the salvation he would offer on the cross a few hours later, the truth of eternal life promised by his resurrection, and the truth of God's Word that would be revealed in the Bible.

But it seems that truth now has become an elusive commodity, especially in matters of faith. Philosophers ask how we can find truth in our faith if faith is something that is unknowable. They fail to accept that our faith leads us to the truths of which Jesus spoke.

And today many people think of faith in God's truth as a form of simple mindedness, a type of uncritical thinking that is beneath us as so-called sophisticated and educated people.

I would say, however, that merely believing or disbelieving something through our own logic or wishful thinking does not necessarily make it so or not so. The truth is the truth, and our own belief or unbelief neither creates the truth nor suppresses it.

And this is reflected in certain types of post-modern liberal theology, which claims that truth is grounded in cultural and social relevance. In these circles faith and truth constantly are being revised to reflect the changing values and standards of society. For me, that is not evidence of godly faith, but rather worldly agendas. For me, Jesus Christ is the truth.

V.

In any event, here we are. The end of the church year brings us full circle. During the past year we shared the significance of the manger. We walked with Christ through the Gospels, and stood at the cross and renewed our eternal hope through our Lord's resurrection. We heard once again how the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples, and hopefully we were inspired by Jesus' teachings that eventually would be the foundation of the church he would leave behind.

And no matter how many times we come to this point, the stories never grow old. It seems there always is something new and exciting that strengthens and comforts us. And it has been that way for countless generations. How is that possible? How can the greatest story ever told remain so new and vital and alive?

Jesus Christ is the answer. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and his kingdom comes to us from God. We experience through him the means of grace of the hope of glory. And with him we find peace in the world now and look forward to the life of the world to come. *Amen.*