

Yr. B, Christ the King
November 25, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1495 Words

Lessons: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

Who is on trial, here, anyway? Is it Jesus—the itinerant preacher, healer, and antagonist of religious and political rulers? Or is it Pilate—the ruthless tyrant who keeps a firm Roman grip on the Jewish people?

On this ultimate Sunday of the Church year—Christ the King Sunday—we are invited into the impressive headquarters of the most powerful ruler in Jerusalem. We are able to eavesdrop on the conversation between a person who spends *all* his time with the rich and powerful and another person who spends all *his* time with the poor and vulnerable. And we are called to remember which one of these is *our king*.

The Roman occupation of Judea did *not* include basic protections we take for granted, like a trial by jury. Yet, we are—in a sense—invited to be members of a jury this morning. We get to listen to Pilate and to Jesus. We get to affirm once again who we believe...who we trust...who we will follow.

This is nothing new. We make these same kinds of judgments all the time about kings and rulers. Did Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—likely the next king of Saudi Arabia—(did he) demand the murder of a journalist for the *Washington Post*? Does the truth matter? Do we care?

I wonder what the followers of Jesus thought about the trial in Pilate's headquarters. Do you imagine Nicodemus, the Pharisee, having thoughts about it? What about that Samaritan woman Jesus met beside the well? What about the Roman centurion whose own son was saved by Jesus? We know that blind Bartimaeus joined the caravan of Jesus' followers walking up from Jericho to Jerusalem the week before this trial. What did he think, watching with his new eyes as his healer entered Pilate's headquarters?

What did those first followers of Jesus think? What did they believe? Did the truth matter? Did they care?

Had there *been* a jury trial I believe they would have found Jesus to be innocent, but they were not given that chance. They were not invited to make a formal judgment. So, I wonder what they whispered to one another on the street.

These followers of Jesus had a lot to lose if they stood up for the truth. They had everything to lose if they spoke out for justice. We're not talking about the price of oil for their lamps. We're talking about their very lives.

You see, there were plenty of Roman crosses to go around. It was a mean, nasty world back then, as it is now. Simon Peter understood this very well when he denied, denied, denied *any relationship* with Jesus.

We are a little spoiled in 21st century America, particularly in the south. We don't have to deny our relationship with Jesus in order to save our lives or our reputations. In fact, here in Greenville we are more likely to *benefit* by claiming our relationship with Jesus.

I am thankful not to have so much at stake every hour of every day as St. Peter did...as Nicodemus did...as the Samaritan woman or Bartimaeus did. You and I can stand up for the truth *like Jesus did* without fear. You and I can speak out for justice *like Jesus did* without being crucified.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked.

This was his chance! This is when Jesus could have deflected, denied, and distracted Pilate like the masterful spin doctors perform for us every day in politics and in business. Jesus could have ducked behind a ‘safe’ (reasonable and technically accurate) answer about there not having been a king of the Jews since the death of Herod the Great.

Instead, *our King* acted with courage. He wanted to know if Pilate was asking his own genuine question or simply parroting the false claims by the chief priest. *Our king* showed he was willing to engage in honest dialogue with anyone, anywhere, at any time no matter what the cost. Even Pontius Pilate, the gentile tyrant, was invited by Jesus into an honest theological conversation!

“What have you done?” Pilate asked. This was yet another chance, and Jesus blew it!

If I had been his lawyer I would have said, “He’s fed the hungry, cured the sick, and given sight the blind. He’s freed the mentally ill from their torments and welcomed outsiders like sheep into his fold. He’s given hope to the poor and he has taught genuine, life-changing faith to every person he’s met—poor and rich, friend and foe, weak and strong.” If I had been Jesus’ advocate Pilate would have given him a job rather than a death sentence.

But Jesus was not trying to save his *own life*. His mission was so much greater than that. And so he answered Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Notice how Jesus is *still* reaching out to Pilate and offering him—*of all people*—a vision of a non-violent kingdom with liberty and justice for all...not just an empire built for the powerful and privileged, and secured by violence, torture, and the fear of death.

I wonder if Pilate paused to imagine what *his life* might be like as a prefect in this other kind of kingdom. I wonder if Pilate could even *dream* of a kingdom where the rulers have mercy and share that mercy with everyone, *like Jesus did*.

You can see how there *really is a question* of who is on trial. In John’s Gospel, Jesus turns the tables while his own life is on the line. Jesus invites Pilate to consider what liberty, justice and peace for all people might look like. Jesus may be the subject of a Roman trial for death, but Pilate is the subject of *our king’s* trial for life.

“So you *are* a king?” Pilate asks. Was he genuinely intrigued at this moment? Was Pilate confused, but seeking the truth? Or was he baiting the answer that would justify crucifixion for a rebel? We don’t know.

We only know that Jesus took this opportunity with Pilate’s question to clearly define his own personal, lifelong mission. “...this is the reason I was born,” Jesus said. “*This* is the reason I came into the world,” Jesus said, “to testify to the truth.”

When Jesus *began* his ministry he promised to do all the things a Messiah was expected to do: bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to prisoners of war, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. According to Isaiah’s prophesy, Jesus was anointed as the Messiah to proclaim *God’s favor* for *all people*, including all those who were *not favored* by the earthly kings.

And so, here we are watching in judgment at this ultimate moment in Jesus’ life, as he stands before the most powerful ruler in the country and he testifies to the truth of a better life—liberty, justice, and peace for all people, not just the powerful and privileged people. *This* is the truth of God’s kingdom come...*on earth* as it is in heaven.

I looked closely at Jesus words this week, and here is what I found. What Jesus actually said to Pilate, according to the ancient Greek recorded in John’s Gospel was not that he came into the world to ‘*testify*’ to the truth. Rather, Jesus said this:

“I have come into the world so that I might *μαρτυρῶ* for the truth. I have come into the world so that I might—*literally speaking*—martyr for the truth.”

There it is! Jesus has just told Pilate the very same thing he has been telling his own disciples for years. In one sentence, *our king* has just described the length *he* is willing to go for his people. In one sentence, *our king* has just declared the weight *he* is willing to bear for his people.

Dear people, Jesus came to bear witness under the full weight of a Roman cross. Jesus came to give nothing less than his whole life for *all* people...including Pontius Pilate.

In that single moment, standing opposite the most powerful ruler in Judea, Jesus revealed the essence of a *true* king. A godly king does not demand a personal tribute *from his people*. A godly king personally pays tribute for his people. A godly king is one who is willing to bear witness—to bear...to *carry* the full weight of the truth, no matter what. We can be thankful that our godly king came into the world fully prepared to martyr for the truth.

Our godly King came to live *with* the truth, die *for* the truth, and be gloriously resurrected *as the truth* of God’s most gracious rule on earth as it is in heaven. And *this* is why we proclaim him today as King *of kings* and Lord *of lords*, the One who *still lives*...and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.