

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Last week we heard Jesus in our Gospel reading say, “the end is near.” This week we can say, “the end is here,” at least of the church year. The last Sunday of the church year is also known as Christ the King Sunday, which those of us who have been around the Lutheran church for a while have pretty much gotten used to. It was introduced to our liturgical calendar when our previous green hymnal, the Lutheran Book of Worship, came out. I was only fifteen then. So I have kind of grown up with this church festival, and have come to take it for granted. But what surprised me when I first looked into the origin of Christ the King Sunday is how new it is. It originated in the Roman Catholic church only in 1925 in the face of the growing nationalism and secularism of the modern world, and particularly in reaction to the rise of fascism under Benito Mussolini in Italy in the early 1920s. That means, as Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber reminded us a few years ago, that is an “Antifa” church festival. Whatever your thoughts on the contemporary Antifa movement, it is undeniable that the biblical understanding of what it means for Jesus Christ to be king stands in stark contrast to the ways we attempt to rule each other in this world. God’s ways are not our ways, and it helps to be reminded of that. I have come to appreciate this festival and see it as a great way to finish off the church year, anticipating God’s promised culmination of God’s good creation, reconciled, redeemed, and made new not by violence and coercion, but by self-giving love. As I reminded us last Sunday, God wins in the end. Sin and death and the power of evil, they lose.

There have been a lot of ways of imagining that ending over the centuries, starting with the Bible itself. There are the visions of the holy mountain and the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah. There’s the lake of fire in the Book of Revelation, and the final vision there of the holy city descending from heaven to earth. There’s the night vision of Daniel in today’s first reading of the Ancient One on his throne. And then there is today’s Gospel reading. Who thought that would be a good text for Christ the King Sunday? Doesn’t that really belong in Lent, during Holy Week, Good Friday? Jesus is before Pilate, on trial for sedition – for seeking to undermine or overthrow the established order. And for good reason. He has been recognized by his followers as the Messiah, the anointed one of God, that is to say, the king of Israel. So Pilate is naturally curious, and perhaps a little alarmed. He’s in charge of this part of the Roman empire. It’s not yet a province, but it’s been under Roman control already for nearly a century by this time, and *they* decided who the local kings were. So Pilate wants to know if Jesus is claiming to be a king, because that would be a problem for him. Jesus doesn’t deny it. In fact, I think his response “you say that I am a king” could mean something like “you said it” or “you got it.”

But then Jesus seems to change the subject: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world,” he says, “to testify to the truth.” The people who put together our lectionary want to give Jesus the last word today, and so our reading ends here. But in John’s gospel this exchange between Pilate and Jesus is not yet over, and it is Pilate, speaking for all of us, who gets the final word: “What,” he asks, “*is* truth?” Jesus does not answer this time. Or, I should say, he doesn’t *seem* to answer, because he speaks no words after that.

Each time I come to this text I’m reminded again of a poem by the 17th-century English poet, John Donne, that I ran across a decade or so ago. I’ve shared it with you before. Donne writes, “On a huge hill, cragged and steep, truth stands, and hee that will reach her, about must, and about must goe; And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so. It compares truth with a steep hill that can’t be climbed by going straight up it, but only by circling around it in spiral.

Donne's point was that truth is not something that can be grasped directly, or easily – and maybe that one does not grasp it at all, but only comes close to it. The idea is that it is only in living with and around truth that one gradually attains to it. And that makes me think of the church calendar that we cycle through every year, returning again and again to the events and teaching of Jesus' earthly ministry among us. Maybe truth, then, is not so much something that is told – proclaimed and received – as it is something that is lived.

Is that why Jesus was silent in the face of Pilate's question? Is it because he doesn't *have* an answer but that he *is* the answer? Is it because Jesus will testify to the truth not with words, but with his life and his death, and then with his resurrection? Nowhere in the four gospels is the account of Jesus's trial as extensive as it is here in John. And there is a sense in which the trial continues in the events that follow right through to his death. Jesus' final words from the cross in John are, "it is finished." In Greek that is a single word that can have the legal meaning, "case closed."

Jesus' silence is not very satisfying, though, is it? We want the perfect comeback, the kind we always think of later on and wish we could have come up with at the time we were arguing with someone. And this also is not how we like to understand or use the idea of "truth." Truth for us is the irrefutable fact, the convincing argument in a debate. It's something that forces our opponents into submission, something we imagine we can use as a weapon to prove ourselves right and them wrong. But if that ever worked, it has become clear in this age of alternative facts and rampant conspiracy mongering that it is no longer enough to "have" the truth. The truth can only be learned with time and painful experience, it seems.

So then, Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question "what is truth?" because Pilate "can't *handle* the truth." And neither can we. Quite literally. The truth is not something that can be handled or manipulated or used for our own purposes and agendas. The truth that is *the* truth, the truth that Jesus testifies to with his life, death, and resurrection, is the reality of the world as God created it, as God *intends* it to be, and as God will ultimately *bring* it to be. It is a reality that we cannot control or bend to our will, but one that has its own trajectory and goal. But it is also a reality into whose orbit we are drawn, a reality that we are called to circle about in our lives of faith, returning daily to the promise of God made to us in Holy Baptism, the promise that God has captured us into Jesus' orbit and there claimed us as God's own. It is the promise that for Jesus' sake God forgives our stubborn sinfulness that would draw us out of Jesus' orbit if God did not intervene. It is the promise that in Jesus God's kingdom has already begun to come, that the world as God intends it is already breaking into our present reality, despite all appearances to the contrary. We are convinced that this promise is the truth about which Jesus testified, and that we the church bear witness to, not with clever comebacks, but with lives that are shaped by the hope that we cling to. May God grant us grace to persevere in that vocation of hope, until the end becomes a glorious new beginning of a world without end. And may the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.