

Christ the King, 11.21.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Daniel 7:9-14 Psalm 93; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

“Listen to his voice”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week we begin a new church year with the season of Advent. On this last Sunday of the church year Jesus’ voice invites us to think about the mystery of our faith and his kingship over the kingdom of God.

Today’s gospel centers on the conversation between Jesus and Pilate. It is a conversation about two kingdoms – a kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, a position he held for ten years. Both the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds mention Pontius Pilate, seeking to establish the historicity of Jesus, as well as the humanity of Jesus as he suffered to redeem the world from sin and death.

Jesus’ conversation with Pilate is different in John’s gospel than in the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, when Pilate asked Jesus if he was “the king of the Jews,” Jesus simply replied, “*You have said so,*” after which Jesus remained silent. However, John’s gospel captures more of the conversation between Pilate and Jesus.

In John, the conversation between Jesus and Pilate begins as Pilate reenters the Praetorium after speaking outside with the Jewish leaders who had brought the charges against Jesus of calling himself “the king of the Jews.” Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” Jesus replied, “*Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?*” Pilate shows some irritation, replying, “*I am not a Jew, am I?*” Pilate seems to have thought this was a purely religious affair, something he makes clear when he says, “*Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me.*” Yet Pilate refused to be questioned by Jesus, and again asked him, “*What have you done?*” Pilate was asking why Jesus had been handed over to be tried under Roman law instead of Jewish law. We can imagine Pilate’s frustration at being thrust into a dispute that is beyond his interest and grasp.

Jesus finally answers Pilate’s initial question saying, “*My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.*” Jesus states positively that he has kingship over a kingdom. Notice first how Jesus says this, “*My kingdom is not from this world.*” Jesus distinguishes his kingdom from the idea that Pilate clearly had in his mind of a worldly political

kingdom. Second, Jesus further states that his kingdom is different than the kingdoms of this world. Jesus implies that his kingdom is a peaceful kingdom, a kingdom in which his followers will not violently fight for him or resist his being handed over to suffer death.

In John's gospel, Jesus affirms he is a king. He affirms his kingship over a kingdom that is different than earthly kingdoms by explaining a principle of non-resistance, peacefulness and self-sacrifice. All of these aspects of Jesus' remarks place his kingdom in contrast to the kingdoms of this world where its leaders expect their supporters and citizens to fight for them.

What Jesus wants to show Pilate is that his kingdom is not based upon force or any resistance by his disciples. His kingdom is only established *in his* total self-surrender by offering himself for the sin of the world. This is something that the reading from Revelation makes clear this morning, "*To him who loves and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be a kingdom of priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*" Jesus' kingdom is established by his self-sacrificial love for a sinful humanity.

Jesus' words lay bare a truth about the difference between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God: it is the power of the Holy Spirit that establishes the rule of Christ in our hearts. No earthly government can remove the sin of the world or establish faith in the human heart, because earthly governments have no absolute rule or final power over the human heart.

This why in times of national emergencies throughout human history, governments have sought to use the church or religion in general to do their bidding upon the human heart. The point that Jesus is making is that he has power over the hearts of his followers, but they may not use force to keep him from his self-surrender to the cross. Jesus will not resist the way of the cross.

What this means for us as Christians is that our citizenship in this world, as a community of followers, is to be led by our citizenship in Jesus' kingdom. Christ's rule in our hearts should make a difference in how we approach the struggles of this world. Our fellowship with the suffering Servant Jesus is what distinguishes the power of Jesus' kingdom from temporal power. Christians are to be concerned with the struggles of God for justice and righteousness in the world. The very real spiritual struggle of the human heart was the central message of Jesus and the prophets he always pointed toward.

So to say it another way, Jesus' kingdom and his kingship are about the transformation of the human heart. Jesus forgives our sin so that freed, freed from human sinful selfishness, we can finally live with true freedom for our fellow human beings.

After establishing his kingship and kingdom, Jesus says, *“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.”* These words should cause us to sit up and listen. The church year has come full circle. We will hear similar words again in a few weeks at Christmas: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory.”* Again in John 8 Jesus says: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and the truth will make you free.”* And yet again in John 10 Jesus says: *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me...they will heed my voice.”*

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus is God’s truth for human beings, the Word made flesh. Jesus comes into the world seeking entry into each of our hearts, giving us life in his kingdom. Jesus’ voice is the only voice that truly sinks deeply into our hearts, giving us freedom from sin and a peace that cannot be taken away. No kingdom of this world can do this. Freedom in Christ is a powerful freedom that changes the human heart. Alive to Christ, we seek to imitate Christ, so that we become Christ’s body in this world, always pointing toward a kingdom of justice and peace. Our bodies become the hands and the voices through which Christ seeks to show compassion and justice within the kingdoms of this world.

Today we celebrate that we have a king and citizenship in a kingdom that will never end. The prophet Daniel speaks of this in today’s reading, *“To him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him...his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”* Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things.

This is the kingdom that Jesus spoke about to Pilate. Jesus is the Word of truth for all peoples, nations, and languages. Jesus himself is the forgiveness of sin that frees all people so that they might become sisters and brothers serving Christ and one another. The prophet Daniel is describing the promise of a spiritual unity of human hearts transcending all nations and languages. To be one in Christ is to transcend the kingdoms of this world *while living in them*. Jesus frees us to become truly human, human in a way that frees us from our divisive and self-destructive ways.

The reading from Revelation describes Jesus Christ as *“him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us into a kingdom, priests serving God.”* This describes what Jesus did for us with his self-surrender to the cross. He freed us from our sins with the one-time sacrifice of his life for all humanity.

Let's look again at this sentence in the reading from Revelation: "*To him who loves us (present tense) and freed us (past tense) by his blood.*" The mixed verb tenses describe the cross as a one-time past event, the historical expression of God's present and ongoing eternal love. In Jesus, the historical and the eternal come together, bearing upon the kingdoms of this world and all their peoples and languages. All along, God's love for Israel and the world was ongoing. God's love is ongoing because that is who God is. God is love, and the truth of this love is Jesus.

So in today's gospel, Jesus replied to Pilate, "*Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*" Jesus' voice is the voice of love, the voice of forgiveness, justice and compassion for humanity. The voice of Jesus invites us each day to live with justice and compassion for our neighbors. Listen to his voice. We cannot get to the kingdom, we cannot say we belong to his kingdom or claim to know anything about him, without listening to his voice.

Jesus' voice is the voice that went to people on the margins of the world – to the oppressed, the possessed, the sick, the outcast, the sinner, the transgressor. Jesus went to them and Jesus comes to each of us. The kingdom of Jesus includes all people, ethnicities, genders and identities. There is no "us and them" before Jesus. There are only people in need of the freedom of forgiveness.

You know, Pilate came really close. He knew Jesus was innocent. He tried to release him, but in the end, Pilate caved in to the pressure of the sinful compromises we often make in the kingdoms of this world. In the end, Pilate, though he knew Jesus was innocent, could not hear Jesus' voice. The noise of the crowds, the noise of the world, pulled him away from Jesus. We can learn something from this. If you had the opportunity to talk face to face with Jesus, would you listen to his voice?

Jesus' words about the truth and listening to him should remind us of his baptism, and God's voice, "*This is my beloved, Listen to him!*" In a few moments, through Holy Baptism, we will welcome Arden Vale English into the kingdom as a beloved child of God and an heir to Christ Jesus. To be baptized is to be made an heir of the kingdom, to become a citizen, not only of this temporary world of troubles, but to become a citizen of an eternal and ongoing kingdom of God's love.

As Arden grows, I hope that she will hear and come to know Jesus' voice, because we are each created to know this voice of truth. All that was created was made through this Word of truth. We are created to hear and know the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who is Christ the King.

"*To him who loves us and frees us from our sins by his blood be glory and dominion forever and ever.*" Listen to his voice. His voice will be the difference in your life. His voice frees us from sin to live without fear, to live for others. Listen to his voice. Amen.