

SERMON- Christ the King (B)
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Good Shepherd
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Psalm 132:1-13 (14-19)

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

OPENING:

My story's scene is like our Gospel's:

only it's the modern-day and in Annapolis, Maryland.

It's late one night, into the early morning, and the police are conducting a trial of sorts, outside a college dorm for students at St. John's College.

The police are there because students are being questioned for the type of things that college students might get arrested for at that late time of night.

The police have the perpetrators lined up and our interrogating them.

The policeman says: "What I want you to do now is—don't lie to me, I want you to tell us the truth."

And one of the college kid perks up and replies:

"I will tell you the truth, if you can tell me what TRUTH is."

That's the same famous question that Pilate has, right after our Gospel reading.

Jesus and Pilate are having this strange dance during an interrogation.

Jesus says: "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

And Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

Now, if you know anything about St. John's College in Annapolis, it's that it's famous for its Great Books curriculum, where students read the foundational texts of Western knowledge—Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, the Bible—and talk about them.

It's an education like none other, and perhaps that is what motivated that young college student to ask such a bold question.

GOSPEL

Should we give Pilate the same benefit of the doubt?

Was he trying, with his question, to get at the heart of the matter?

"What is truth?"

Had he been moved by this strange prophet-prisoner in front of him, so that he asked that question with sincerity?

Or was he being sarcastic, disdainful of the ragamuffin dropped off at his doorstep by the local authorities?

The latter is probably closer to the historical record of the type of person we know Pilate to have been, a harsh and brutal politician.

But John presents him as being somewhat sympathetic, or maybe just pathetic, caught between the desire to do the right thing, and the all-too-human tendency to do the easy thing.

TRUTH:

“What is truth?” Pilate asks, and Jesus does not reply... at least verbally.

Those students from St. John’s College might have been able to answer, however, with their knowledge of Greco-Roman thought.

They might have said something like:

The **Greek** word for “truth” *aletheia* has to do with the true perspective on reality. It meant a philosophical perception of the way things truly were.

Or they might have cited the **Latin** word for “truth” *veritas*, which is an accurate factual representation of events.

(That might have been more like what the Annapolis cops and the Roman Governor Pilate were looking for—a literal retelling of the events in this world.¹)

The **truth** that Jesus lived and preached, of course, could not be described or limited by either of those definitions.

It’s neither a far-off theoretical proposition of learnedness, NOR is it a *Dragnet*-style “just the facts, ma’am” forensic, tactile thing.

The truth of Jesus, the truth of the Gospel, is something different than those, something more than those, we Christians believe.

It’s something beyond that, of another world, but also more real to *this* world than any truth you have ever known.

¹ Keener, Craig S. 2003. *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*. (Volume 2) Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. 1109-1114; Van de Weghe, Luuk, and John A Battle. 2021. “Truth and Semantic Change in the Gospel of John.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 31 (2): 217

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

To try to answer Pilate's question, it might be helpful to explain what this 'Christ the King Sunday' is all about.

Why are we suddenly on trial, under interrogation, here as we get ready for Thanksgiving, for Advent and for Christmas? It seems a little out of place.

That's because in 1925, Pope Pius XI declared a new feast day for the calendar, Christ the King Sunday, with the intention of reminding the Church and the world of Christ's lordship and reign over all creation, and with the intention of reminding us to work for God's peaceful kingdom in this world.²

It was a timely reminder, Europe had just gone through the most devastating war on record, and more was yet to come, another World War, the Holocaust and the rest of the 20th century's woes.

The cynic in me wonders if the Pope's declaration of this new holiday was 'too little too late', that he was 'whistling past the graveyard' with such a proclamation.

Christ the King Sunday, snuck in at the end of the church calendar year, becomes merely a rearguard delaying action against all the trials and tribulations of modern life,

So, it feels a little off, declaring Christ as King, because so much evidence seems to be pointing to the contrary.³

But the Calendar indeed flips and we head into Advent.

The end becomes the beginning.

IT's a funny thing about Jesus' life, both at the start and at its close, he was caught up in the gears of Roman bureaucracy and Roman kingship. The Roman census put his birth story into crisis, and then, during this trial, Jesus is ensnared in the nightmare of cold imperial power.

Jesus of Nazareth did not seem to be King of his own meagre life.

CONCLUSION

Is Christ King? In this world, in the church, in our hearts even?

"What is truth?" We ask these questions, in 2021 or in 1925 or the year 33, and it's

² [Quas Primas \(December 11, 1925\) | PIUS XI \(vatican.va\)](#)

³ Originally Christ the King Sunday was prior to All Saints on the church calendar.

hard to answer with any certainty.

Anytime we might seem to answer it, that there seems to be some sort of progress: be it “The War to End all Wars”; the fall of the Soviet Union, Pick your historical moment.

We go ahead and choose Barabbas and put Jesus right back up on the cross.

“What is truth?” Pilate asks, and that question echoes before us and across centuries.

Luckily Christians have given witness, have given their account, have been asked and have been answering these questions ever since the 1st century.

St. Paul wrote half his letters from prison, yet he proclaimed and declared unequivocally that Jesus was “King, the world’s true Lord.”⁴

John the Evangelist wrote our Gospel, knowing that, even as he put pen to paper, that Caesar the King was persecuting Christians.

One way to answer is that it’s not actually Jesus on trial here. Jesus knows the score, knows that the courtroom has actually flipped, Pilate is on trial. Even more scarily, we are on trial, outside with Peter by the fire.

But Jesus has already given us our testimony

“What is truth?”

Jesus said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

Jesus said “The truth will set you free.”

Christ is King, in spite of it all, that’s what Christians have been believing since Ascension Day, that Jesus is King, now, not later, not only at the end of the calendar, but now.

The Greeks might have believed that timeless truth existed outside of the world but Christians believe truth is given to us in a particular person in a particular time and place: Jesus of Nazareth... The gospel is not a summary of ‘the necessary truths of reason’; rather it is a revelation that shatters and reshapes human reason in light of God’s foolishness.”⁵

Jesus answers Pilate’s question “What is truth?”, by just standing there, staring at Pilate, staring at us, providing us the answer. “At the end of all our striving and longing (and questioning) we find, not a force, but a face.”⁶

AMEN

⁴ Wright, N. T. 2011. *For All the Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed*. London: SPCK, 65.

⁵ Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. 299-300.

⁶ Michael Gerson. Sermon. Washington National Cathedral (2/17/2019) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/read-michael-gersons-sermon-sharing-his-struggle-with-depression>