

Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2018, John 18:33-37
Pastor Bill King

Facing a nation crippled by the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt famously proclaimed “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” He went on to say we must confront “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Whatever you think of FDR’s policies, he certainly understood the power of fear. Biologists tell us that fear shuts down the part of our brain which is in charge of logical, moral, and creative thinking. Fear makes us less able to cope with the challenges we face, by making us think our options are only fight or flight. When we are afraid we tend to cower or lash out.

And we are a fearful people these days. It is a truism that we are a bitterly divided nation. Pick up any newspaper or listen to any of the talking heads on TV and you see enough anger to curdle cream. Look a little deeper and you realize that beneath all that anger is really fear. We are afraid our jobs are going overseas. We are afraid the values we have cherished are increasingly regarded as quaint and outmoded. We are afraid that strange people, from foreign lands, speaking unfamiliar languages are going to undermine our country (A fear which Lutherans encountered when their boats from Germany and Scandinavia first arrived on these shores). We are afraid that our culture grows coarser by the day and that the most vicious racism finds support at the highest levels of government. Both liberals and conservatives fear we are losing our privacy to forces too big to control. Most troubling of all, we are afraid of one another, assuming malevolence whenever we encounter mere disagreement.

The consequences of all that fear are far reaching. We stop thinking about creative solutions and just emotionally react to whatever spikes our anxiety. Even if there *were* a healthy path forward we are too blinded by our fear to see it. But more dangerous, fear makes us hunger for scapegoats and easy answers to ease our anxiety. “If only those people weren’t here everything would be okay,” we think. We create cardboard enemies to blame for our woes, which is much easier than dealing with the complexities of the real world.

Fearful people are suckers for the illusion of security. When the deck of the ship is roiling in the storm, we long to know that there is a strong hand on the rudder—and we will embrace anything or anyone who will promise us some measure of security. And that brings us to the implicit questions at the heart of today’s gospel lesson: Where is true security to be found? What is worthy of our loyalty when we are filled with fear and seeking direction? To those questions this day offers an answer of comfort, challenge, and direction: Christ is King.

The scene of Jesus before Pilate drips with irony. Pilate sits on his judgment seat, the representative of Caesar and the embodiment of a seemingly eternal empire. He is the essence of what the world calls power, sure that cruelty, coercion, and imperial riches will always win the day. Before him stands an itinerant teacher whose only obvious

power is his piercing presence. Yet, in a few short years, Pilate's invincible empire will crumble from within and this preacher's movement will sweep the known world. To all appearances Caesar is Lord, but in reality God is already acting to raise up another sovereign.

It is easy to believe the "gold rule" governs our world: He who has the gold makes the rules. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the law of the jungle not the law of love holds sway in human affairs. Yet our text invites us to see that long after any tempestuous tyrant fades into the mists of history, God's purposes continue to unfold. We can take hope and consolation from the fact that just as surely as Christ is risen from the grave to which Pilate sent him, God's desire for justice and mercy will finally triumph.

But that does not mean that Christians are to be spectators in the cheap seats waiting for the divine drama to unfold. At one point Pilate asks Jesus if he is a King. We have often misunderstood the reply. It is often rendered, "My kingdom is not of this world." From those simple words some have suggested that Christian faith has nothing to do with the nitty-gritty of daily life, that the job of the church is the purely "spiritual" task of moving souls through earthly life to their heavenly home.

Yet, if you think twice about Jesus' own ministry, you see how absurd that understanding is. He was daily engaged in feeding the hungry, giving comfort to the outcast, bringing healing wherever he could, speaking in behalf of those who had little voice. Jesus spoke to their deepest longings and needs, but he never forgot that souls exist within bodies.

We can translate Jesus' reply another way, "My kingdom is not *from* this world." That single word change helps us see what Jesus is saying. His kingdom (we might also say his way of being) does not take its cue from the rules of the world; it does not rest on the violence and coercion that characterizes Caesar's rule. Instead, he draws his authority and marching orders *from* the God whom the psalmist describes as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Jesus looks to the God of Israel who cares deeply about the suffering of the people. Christ *is* King, but he is a different kind of King. He is a king who seduces rather than coerces, a sovereign whose power is always used in behalf of the most vulnerable.

Even so we are not so sure we want a King. We call this day "Christ the King Sunday." The emphasis is relatively new to the liturgical year, not observed ecumenically until the mid 1960s. One commentator offers this rather condescending comment, "In some ways, of course, [Christ the King] is already outdated. To picture Christ in royal terms may have made sense when royalty was a reality. But in our democratic postmodern age, such imagery seems quaint at best, anachronistic at worst."

Certainly we need to be aware of the implications of language; patriarchal and hierarchical images have done a lot of mischief over the centuries. But there is nothing wrong with the image. The real problem is that we resist the idea of anything crimping our style. In any given week a minority of Americans will kneel at a Christian altar, but

virtually all of us bow before the idol of total individual freedom. “Nobody is going to tell *me* how use my time, money, and energy. Nobody is going limit what I think and do,” we silently chant to ourselves, “and that includes God.”

And there, my friends, is the rub, because Jesus aspires to be our King, the one to whom we owe absolute loyalty. Yes, Jesus is kind, caring, and compassionate, but he is more than our buddy; he is our sovereign. If Christ is King then we do not have absolute freedom to chart our own path; he has a claim on our lives.

A cartoon once appeared in a religious publication. It pictured Moses, newly down from meeting God atop Mt. Sinai, addressing the people. The caption read, “I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that I’ve got him down to ten; the bad news is that adultery is still in.” That humorous cartoon makes a serious point: God has a claim on our lives; when we call Christ our King, we acknowledge a desire to follow in his way.

That means that we seek to reflect God’s passion for reconciliation, justice, and mercy in every facet of our lives—in how we do our work, in how we spend our money, in how we use our time, in how we express our sexuality, in how we vote. God’s kingdom is not from this world, but it most assuredly exists in this world.

Some might protest that this makes religion too political. So let’s say it clearly: There is no such thing as apolitical religion. Religion is never neutral; it always either supports the status quo or works to change it. If I see a man being beaten on the street, I either ignore him or try to help him. Both actions take a position. One response says that this is wrong; the other that I really do not care about the injustice. In like manner, if we see many in our community who are hungry, cold, and without adequate health care and offer them a religion which is so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good, we have said loud and clear that we do not care about their suffering—and neither does God.

Our challenge is to work for change in a way that reflects the reconciling way of Jesus. Religion is always political, but it need not be partisan. Our calling is to be passionate but not petty, courageous but not cranky, unflinching in our concern for the vulnerable, but ever eager to break down barriers between ourselves and those whom we find it hard to love.

On this Christ the King Sunday let us take consolation and new hope in knowing that finally God is indeed sovereign over creation. In the fullness of time all that is ugly and unjust will pass away. Christ is risen; we know the end of the story. And, therefore, let us also rededicate ourselves to acting as though we really do acknowledge Christ as our King.

We live as people of faith who are both confident and challenged. The Talmud, that great treasure of Jewish wisdom, captures the tension beautifully; let these words guide us in the days ahead: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now,

love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” Amen.