

November 24, 2024
Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Joshua Wong

Let us pray: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, you are our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today in the Church calendar, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. The Roman Catholic Church under Pope Pius XI first established this feast in 1925, in honor of Jesus Christ as Lord over all Creation. That is why all of our readings today are about the Kingship of God.

Each of the four Gospels has a different perspective of Jesus' trial, and our Gospel today is John's version of the Roman trial. In his version, Jesus is portrayed as a dangerous threat to the high priests who wanted Jesus dead in order to preserve their cultural and societal values. Because they were under Roman occupation, the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to carry out the death penalty, therefore, they must persuade Pilate to execute Jesus, although the Romans in fact have nothing against him. John makes it clear in Chapter 19 that a great majority of Jews did not want Jesus dead because many had already become his believers. It was only the high priests who were threatened by Jesus, and were instrumental in putting him to death.

What is also **NOT** found in the other Gospels is this extensive verbal exchange between Pilate and Jesus about the kingship of Christ. Pilate asked Jesus, are you a king? If Jesus said yes, then it would give Pilate a reason to put Jesus to death, because he would be considered a rebel against the Roman government. So, ultimately, this was the reason Jesus was condemned and crucified. The crucifixion was a Roman method of death, not a Jewish way of death. For Jews, stoning was their method.

This fact is very important to know, because we hear anti-Semitic remarks today about how Jews were responsible for “killing Jesus.” In fact, it was the Romans who killed Jesus. Jewish people on the whole did not want Jesus dead. It was the Roman government that condemned him because He admitted to being a king.

Make no mistakes about it, even though Jesus’ disciples and the crowds had confessed him to be “King of Israel,” this was a different kind of a king from the political threat to Roman rule that Pilate was referring to.

Jesus’ Kingdom does not teach violence and domination, but teaches that power rests on self-giving love. Even today we struggle with leaders who want to achieve power through domination, but Jesus’ kingdom has always been based on self-giving love.

In their dialogue, the next topic that comes up is “truth.” This is a major theme in

Gospel of John. The word occurs twenty-five times, much more than any other Gospels. For John, truth is not an object, not a body of material that can be possessed. Jesus is not a great teacher who gives his disciples a set of “truths” to follow, but instead, Jesus gives himself as an example of God’s truth. Truth is a “who,” not a “what.” Truth is a matter of personal encounters and relationships with God and people, truth is lived out in the kingdom of God, by following the power of the Holy Spirit. John 16 says, When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears.

For John, truth is a matter of doing, of ethics, of wanting to do the will of God, not a matter of abstract principles. Today, this Gospel is more relevant than ever before. We live in a society in which we maneuver through misinformation and lies. So it begs us to ask ourselves, where do we find truth? Is it from the popular way of thinking, or is it by following the actions of Christ in his treatment of others? Are we following the Holy Spirit in our actions?

The Holy Spirit leads us in living out truth through many ways, and works through us when we are not looking for it. The Divine compels us to act truthfully in our daily lives.

Al Pacino published a book call *Sonny Boy*. I’ll read a short excerpt about someone in his life who acted in truth.

“Blanche Rothstein, my junior high school teacher, had bigger plans for me. One day she scaled the five flights of stairs in our tenement to reach our apartment because she wanted to speak to my grandmother. She was there, not to discipline me but to embolden me: “This boy must be allowed to continue to act,” she told Granny. “This is his future.” It was such a simple gesture, and so rare. No one has ever made this kind of effort, at least not on my behalf. What this great, devoted teacher was doing was an honorable thing, what all teachers can offer, which is inspiration and dedication to their position. Encouragement—the greatest word in the English language. My grandmother didn’t quite pick up on what this teacher was doing, but my mother did, and she was troubled by it. As she understood it, we were poor people, and poor people don’t do acting. As you know, the rest is history, yet because of a kind act by a junior high school teacher, Al Pacino is now one of America’s most legendary actors.

It takes teachers and caregivers motivated by truth to change our society. Truth is not a set of rules, but actions. This is living out Jesus’ kingdom. I’m sure you are someone who has done something to change the world because it was the right thing to do. Jesus did not offer a set of statements about truth, but offered himself as an example of truth.

Do you know what the greatest result of living out truth is? Experiencing transformation. Al Pacino's life is an example of that. But there are also other examples of living in truth.

The act of Coming out can be scary, risky and painful. But living truthfully with who you are is another example of positive transformation. Those of us fortunate enough to do so can testify how free it feels when we are honest and genuine to ourselves and the world. When I came out, one of the first memories I had was from a verse in Matthew, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." After coming out to myself and to my maker, I was a transformed person. I became much more happier, more truthful in my faith, and even more creative in my art.

Unfortunately, the opposite happens when we are not truthful. We have all heard about LGBTQia people who live in hypocrisy, who end up hurting the ones they love most, including some church leaders who cause damage to God and to His church.

What have we learned about the Feast of Christ the King? We learned that Jesus was not the king Pilate imagined. Instead, God's kingdom is about a kingdom that follows the example of Jesus' life of truth and self-giving love. Jesus is king, but

did not come to dominate, nor did our King hand us a set of rules to follow, but he is our example to live by. When we do so, we become transformed people. Our Collect says, “God’s will is to restore all things in his Son, mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved in sin may be brought together under his gracious rule.”

On this Festival day, let us worship our King because of his humility and life-giving love. May we pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s guidance in living out a life of self-giving love and truth.

Amen.