

Christ's Kingdom Will Have No End
A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul
by The Rev. Craig Lemming, Associate Rector
Sunday, November 25, 2018 – Proper 29: Christ the King

Let us pray:

**Lead on, O King eternal,
till sin's fierce war shall cease,
and holiness shall whisper
the sweet amen of peace;
for not with swords loud clashing,
nor roll of stirring drums,
but deeds of love and mercy,
your heavenly kingdom comes.¹ Amen.**

In 2008, after making my debut in San Francisco singing the role of the Evangelist in Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John Passion*, one critic published the following review of my performance:

As the Evangelist, tenor Craig Lemming boasted a bright tone, crisp diction, and an exuberant stage presence. [So far so good, right? Well, then he writes...] Occasionally bordering on the histrionic, Lemming nonetheless forcefully conveyed the passion story, making him an appealing narrator.²

Yes, as a budding musician in my twenties, I admit to histrionic, melodramatic, theatrical, and over-the-top tendencies both on and off the stage. And yet, even after ten years of working diligently to temper my exuberant ways and earning some hard-won maturity, the Passion narrative in John's Gospel still evokes a

¹ Verse Two, Hymn #555, *The Hymnal 1982: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church, Accompaniment Edition (2 Volumes)*, 1982.

²

<https://www.sfcv.org/reviews/smaller-no-less-passionate>

visceral, emotional, compassionate response in me. The trial scene between Jesus and Pontius Pilate is incredibly dramatic and it leaves an indelible impression on our hearts and minds. After Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” all the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record the rather laconic, four-word response of Jesus as, “You have said so.” In the Gospel according to John, however, we hear a much more engaging, dramatic, and haunting response from Jesus. As we just heard in this morning’s Gospel, Jesus says,

‘my kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. 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.’ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”³

One biblical scholar discusses Jesus’s remarkable statement on the origin of his kingdom and kingship, with its sharp distinction between Christ’s kingship and the world. He writes, “Jesus expands upon his unique function as witness to the truth in lines that are distinctively Johannine. Pilate’s question [“What is truth?”] (John 18:38) expresses Pilate’s disinterest and cynicism, but it also mirrors [Pilate’s] profound alienation from the truth.⁴ While Christ’s kingdom is living and moving

³ John 18:36-38 (NRSV).

⁴ James L. Mays and Society of Biblical Literature, eds., *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, Indexed ed. (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1988), 1072.

and having our being in radical truthfulness, this world's Empires are represented by Pilate's disinterest, indifference, cynicism, and profound alienation from the truth. When Pilate's ways are normalized by world leaders, the enslavement of African peoples, the genocide of First Nations' peoples, the Holocaust, orgies of gun violence, and the willful destruction of Planet Earth are some of the ways innocent lives continue to be crucified under Pontius Pilate. The words of Holocaust Survivor, Elie Wiesel remind us that,

**The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.**⁵

One resource that helps us to courageously resist the disinterest, indifference, cynicism, and profound alienation from the truth today is found in the Collect appointed for this Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King Sunday. Its petition asks God, "Mercifully grant that the people of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under [Christ's] most gracious rule." The trial scene in this morning's Gospel vividly represents this juxtaposition of being divided and enslaved by sin (which Pilate and the Roman Empire represent) and being freed and brought together in Christ's kingdom of unity in diversity.

⁵ Elizabeth (edit). Knowles, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 5th ed., ed. Elizabeth Knowles (New York: OUP, 2001), 816.

Now the phrase, “divided and enslaved by sin,” might make you anxious, but do not be anxious about sin! St. John’s is a place of Grace, and in the words of Martin Luther: **“God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”**⁶

For me, Sin is best explained in our Catechism. On pages 848 and 849 in *The Book of Common Prayer* we read the following questions and answers:

Q. What is sin?

A. Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.

Q. How does sin have power over us?

A. Sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted.⁷

We might interrogate the Catechism further by asking, “Well, if by seeking the will of God I can avoid being enslaved by sin; what exactly *is* the will of God?” The Collect provides us with an answer: **“Almighty and everlasting God, *whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son.*”** In Jesus Christ it is God’s will to restore us to wholeness, to make us free and to bring all people together in right

⁶ <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/letsinsbe.txt>

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 848-849.

relationship. It is Christ who proclaims God's unconditional love of all people – particularly love of the outcast. It is Christ, crowned with thorns, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and lynched in front of his mother and his loved ones on a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, whom we worship as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It is Christ crucified and risen who restores the selfish seeking of our own will to the seeking of God's will, which is always and forever to love and to belong to each other, to love and to belong to God, and to love and to belong to all of Creation!

It is Christ the King whom we worship, celebrate, and adore. The Holy One who liberates us from the slavery of selfishness; who restores us to being the Image of God which is Beloved Community. Our Lord's Prayer teaches us that when we persist in giving bread to the hungry, God's daily bread is given and received, our human dignity is restored, God's will is done, and Christ's kingdom has come. When we persist in forgiving each other, and forgiving ourselves, God forgives us, God's will is done, and Christ's kingdom has come. The language we pray creates the reality it describes.

The Collect's reality is that when we listen to and we permit Christ the King of Love and Mercy to rule in our hearts, then we belong to God's kingdom of

truthfulness. As the Gospel teaches us, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to Christ’s voice.” A voice that calls us to be one thing and one thing only: loving. More importantly – and this is the challenge of our faith – to belong to the truth, we must listen to and obey the voice of Christ who calls us to love our enemies. As Howard Thurman wrote, **“it was upon the anvil of the Jewish community’s relations with Rome that Jesus hammered out the vital content of his concept of love for one’s enemy.”**⁸ And it was in Jesus’ love for his enemy – yes, even his Roman enemy who crucified him – that **“The final barrier between the strong and the weak, between ruler and ruled, disappeared.”**⁹ In the kingdom of Christ there is only perfect freedom. No one is a ruler, and no one is ruled. In beloved kinship, everyone is free to love and to serve one another.

As Christians whose kingdom is Beloved Community, we affirm in the words of the Nicene Creed this truth: that Christ the King of Love and Mercy “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and **his kingdom will have no end.**” When we, in the beauty of all of our kaleidoscopic diversity say these words together in unity, remember that Pilate’s disinterest, indifference, cynicism, and profound alienation from the truth will always be vanquished by the King of Love:

⁸ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 81.

⁹ Thurman, 93.

Jesus Christ. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving God who is Christ in each another, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁰

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Revelation 1:5-6.