

## WHAT KING, WHAT TRUTH?

*Christ the King – B* November 25, 2018

John 18:33-37, [38a]

*Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”*

In the context of this morning’s gospel reading, Pilate’s question, back to Jesus, seems almost too pivotal to ignore. Before him is a “king” whose realm is nowhere yet everywhere. Jesus isn’t there as a threat against Rome; yet his whole ministry seems to go against all the powers of this world. Pilate’s next words in John’s gospel will be “I find no charge against him.” But there is a crowd out there, stirred up against Jesus, for reasons which we can’t totally comprehend, but somehow lie in Jesus’ refusal to toe the line and act like the kind of king, the Messiah, that the Jewish people had expected.

While there is a lot of royal imagery attached to Jesus in the gospels: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” [Matthew 2:2], and Matthew tracing Jesus’ genealogy to the royal lineage of David, Jesus resists the efforts of some to make him king. He was not about overthrowing Rome as much as he was about transforming the whole world.

Needless to say, when Jesus entered Jerusalem and the crowds hailed him with “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” there were plenty of people who saw Jesus’ power and popularity as threats to their existence. Among those who felt threatened were the political and religious elites—the high rollers whose lives and livelihood depended on keeping things on an even keel in this occupied territory.

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year: Christ the King. The celebration wasn’t on the early church calendar, but rather, came as a papal proclamation by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as an attempt by the church to address the secularization of the nations, particularly the rise of dictatorships whose power relied on complete allegiance of the citizenry or—perhaps more-accurately described—subjects. The church hoped to break the spell dictators like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin were luring people into—with demands of blind loyalty and a repudiation of the authority of religion (what Karl Marx dubbed “the opiate of the people”), and in particular, the church, to bring a moral conscience into the conversation.

One would hope that nearly 100 years since that proclamation, the world would be very different. Well, it is, and it isn’t. History is a great teacher; but too often people refuse to heed its warning. The drug isn’t religion, but rather the illusions of power and wealth, the same powers of this world that have hypnotized human beings through the ages. Their illusory appeal leads people, not to their better selves, but right into the powers of sin and death.

To shine light on the illusions and their ability to reel us in, I share some thoughts from Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA Lutheran pastor who founded the *Church for All Sinners and Saints* in Denver, Colorado. She has written, often confessionally of her struggles in life and along her faith journey. Pertaining to this morning’s gospel she wrote, three years ago, about the painful, inconvenient truth of the gospel, and her insights, while a bit blunt, describe much of what we are seeing in our nation, in our world, and (painfully) in ourselves.

*...[I]f we are going to celebrate a king here today at least it could be one who will wipe out all the racists and those who do violence to women and those who hurt children and everyone who is more interested in protecting the wealth of the rich*

*than protecting the wellbeing of the poor. I want Christ to be a king who can wipe out Isis and Al Qaeda and Boko Haram and the people who cancelled Firefly after just 14 episodes. But...if Christ is my king he's doing a lousy job of smiting my enemies.*

*“[T]he problem is that when that vengeance seeking and violent part of me calls out to have a king who would destroy my enemies I inevitably would be the one that same king would have to destroy. Since God is the God of all and I too am someone's enemy....*

*“[A]s much as I “believe” in non-violence, it does not mean that there is not also violence in myself...it is simply delusional for me to believe that the only reason I have not taken up arms is anything other than the fact that my privileged, peaceful, educated, high standard of living is procured by violence elsewhere that is safely out of my sight. Since, let's be honest, the life I lead of relative peace and prosperity is procured by child labor and police actions.*

*“So, given the way I benefit from violence, given the fact that I too want my enemies to be destroyed, what I need, what we need, what this broken-ass world needs is not a king with the greatest arsenal—we don't need a czar who knows how to keep everyone under control and doing his bidding. We don't need a Kaiser who wins the violence and retribution cycle, or a CEO who can protect our wealth.*

*“We need a Lord who saves us by refusing to play that game at all. “*

*[Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Fall on Your Knees” at Sarcastic Lutheran, 12-01-2015.]*

Jesus does that as he overcomes the misguided powers of this world. And he can transform this world, one-by-one, as he transforms us. Those things that harm any of us are harmful to all of us. Or, to quote Martin Luther King, Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Whenever and wherever we cede power to those who promise great things for “the deserving” at the expense of “the least of these,” we have lost the vision: the truth that Jesus planted within us when he called us his own. Just playing the game of “I'm better/more deserving because...” is dangerous and deadly. God knows we should know better!

May the One who is truly Lord of all lead us in the path of light and truth. Amen.