

THE REIGN OF CHRIST

John 18:33-37

Last Sunday in Pentecost Year B November 22, 2015

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May Jesus the Christ, Lord of Lord and King of Kings be present with us here in this moment, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in His sight.

On our liturgical calendar, today is celebrated as “Christ the King day”. I was thinking about “kings” doing some research for this sermon and came across this list. So for fun, let’s start out with an interactive question, and I will give you about 15 seconds to think it over. Who do think are the 3 most notable earthly kings throughout history?

Okay, who has some guesses?

According to this list I came across, the top three most notable kings and descriptions are as follows:

“The third most notable is Alexander III of Macedon. 356-23 BC. He had a kingdom at 20 and an empire by thirty two. Alexander the Great was a military genius whose territory spanned from the Adriatic Sea to the Indus River. A man of legendary vision, Alexander toppled great dynasties, built new cities and promoted the spread of Greek ideas and culture throughout the ancient world. A celebrated hero of the Classical age, Alexander’s rise to power was swift and short-lived, but his legacy resonates, even today.”

The second most notable is or own Henry VIII of England. 1491-1547. He may’ve started the English Reformation but, let’s face it – Henry VIII six wives are why he’s famous. Highly educated and charismatic, Henry was also extremely cutthroat...literally. Political enemies were beheaded and personal foes often suffered the same fate. His marriages to Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard ended at the executioner’s chopping block. Though his personal troubles were motivated by the desire for a male heir, Henry VIII would come to father two of England’s most famous queens.

The number one notable king was Louis XIV. 1638-1715. He built the Palace of Versailles and embarked on a series of costly wars. Though he wanted to project an image of power, Louis XIV symbolized the frivolity of eighteenth-century monarchical rule. By taking opulence and absolutism to their extremes, some argue Louis XIV thrust France into financial ruin, which led his country down the road to revolution. Called the “Sun King” in life, his legacy casts a long, dark shadow, making him the most famous and notorious king in history.”

Looking down through the ages, we see there were many other rulers who, like the three kings just discussed, if not called king, queen, pharaoh or the like, fancied themselves to be all powerful, and in essence they were in their own realms because they were in total control and could do whatever they wanted to do. I think that is the key phrase: ALL POWERFUL. Being such a ruler meant not only seeing oneself as omnipotent, but feeling that he or she possessed the power, and then believing that “power” was “the” necessary attribute and key to ultimate success. Power became the “be all to end all” in establishing control. And, planning and scheming to gain that control was the means to that success and power. Or so was their illusion.

Now, let’s change gears and look at the word “truth”. Truth appears over 200 times in the Bible depending on which version you are counting and which translation you use. An online source says “the Greek word for “truth” is aletheia, which literally means to “un-hide” or “hiding nothing.” It conveys the thought that truth is always there, always open and available for all to see, with nothing being hidden or obscured.”

The Hebrew word for “truth” is emeth, which means “firmness,” “constancy” and “duration.” Such a definition implies an everlasting substance and something that can be relied upon.

So, what happens when power is confronted by truth?

In a recent bible study here at St. Ben’s we read and discussed a renowned Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann’s book “Truth Speaks to Power”. In this book Brueggemann explores some of the confrontation between power and truth.

He begins by examining the contest between pharaoh and YHWH. Later he makes the same comparison with the interrogation of Jesus by Pilate which we have in our Gospel reading today.

He says there will be a cast of characters in the battle between truth and power. Pharaoh, is the earthly ruler who exemplifies power. Moses, is the human agent of YHWH, God. The Jewish exiles represent pain and suffering and cause the confrontation. Then there is TRUTH. Ultimately, the truth of YHWH triumphs over Pharaoh’s earthly power because the Jewish people are freed and Pharaoh is powerless to stop it.

Power must bow to Truth. God’s truth is never hidden and always open for all to see. There is no planning and scheming to gain control. God’s truth not constrained by lifetimes and is therefore eternal.

Brueggemann details the same confrontation between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate represents Caesar, the earthly power. Jesus is the human agent of YHWH. The jealous high priests and the rabid crowd are the circumstances agents who bring the confrontation to a head. And again.... The winner is..... the truth of YHWH, God, triumphs over the earthly ruler’s power. Jesus rises from the sentence of earthly death because death is powerless in the face of eternal life.

What does this mean for us Christians? In Acts 5:29 the apostles answer the question.

When brought before the high council and questioned by the high priest and admonished for continuing to teach in the name of Jesus, Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"

Can it really be that simple?

The apostles' answer reflects what we as Christians know. God is truth. God is unhidden and is always there, always open and available for all to see. God is firm, constant and there for all time as Jesus said "I will be with you always even unto the end of the age."

I love this quote by Abraham Lincoln. When listening to a group of people's logic, Abraham Lincoln, testing their logic, asked the group the following question. "How many legs would a sheep have if you called its tail a leg? The group replied 5." President Lincoln answered their answer with the truth. "No, it would have four legs. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it one."

The kind of thinking that President Lincoln was referring to seems to permeate a lot of the reasoning that goes on today in our world. Is truth a matter of the majority opinion? Is it a matter of conformity? Is truth nothing more than what each of us asserts as true? A number of present day rulers would have us believe that.

Truth can be a tricky concept.

If a person standing in a room says the only exit out of a solid wall room is on the right side of the room where there is a door—that is truth to the one person making the statement. But for people facing that person, the truth is that their exit is actually on their left. And, perhaps they are all wrong because the true answer is that there are exits everywhere, they just have obstacles like walls and roofs making those exits difficult to see.

Yes, this is why I came perilously close to failing Philosophy 101. So, is this a microphone? Or, is it a copy of a microphone, and the real microphone is actually the one true concept of a microphone? Oh good grief! Do I really care which is the true microphone? The answer to that question, folks, is that I really don't care. I just have to know how to turn it on and off. And, as you all well know, I often don't get that right either!

I began by talking about famous rulers of the past. What kind of rulers do we have in the world today? What is their truth, or should I ask what are their truths because they probably don't share a concept of what is absolute truth. It would seem like truth is what is expedient for their purposes and how they can skew information to support these truths.

With rulers today defining truth to suit their own needs, are they the ones I want to follow? They are looking for power: power to get elected and once elected to rule over me because they think that being “all powerful” is what is important. But, they are wrong, just like the rulers in the Bible. Confronted with truth, there is no contest.

Certainly we must live in a society of law and order, but what about my choices as a human being created in the image of God. I have a responsibility to myself, but most importantly to the one who is not caught up in the definition of truth, but is truth itself. My responsibility is to the one who is the constant in my life.

What is the one constant in your life? Isn't the life of the man who wore a crown of thorns, the only crown, the only truth that matters or is even real?

³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

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

Whose reign are you under? Who do you want to follow? Who do you want to have dominion over you? Which crown to you want your ruler to wear? I think we all know the answer to that.

Amen