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The Rev. Kate Byrd

“What is Truth”

Today marks the Feast of Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday. A day in which we as Christians proclaim our understanding that Christ is the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords, as we heard earlier in our collect for today. But, what does it mean for us to proclaim Jesus as the King, Ruler, and Lord of our lives? Especially as we find ourselves today so far removed from the empires and dominating powers of Jesus' time. I mean these words may have once held great power, but they seemingly hold little sway in our own democratic society today. The only real association I can make with words like king or reign are power, rule, and authority. And, these being words that more often than not, are regarded as negative if not downright off putting terms, leave us with a definition that is less than desirable. So, in an effort to truly understand what it means to claim the reign of Christ in our own lives, I believe it might be helpful for us to first try and glean what is being said here in our reading from John as we find Jesus on trial and Pilate demanding an answer to his question, “Are you the King of the Jews.”

In the time of Jesus, for the Romans, kings were often revered as literal gods. When subjects found themselves before the royal throne of *Kaisar Kyrios* (or Lord Caesar) they would turn their faces away from their mighty king, fall to their knees in fear, moving with reverence (or maybe more so terror) backwards on their way to the throne of their lord. Bowing, falling prostrate, all while reciting their creed *Kaisar Kyrios* in worship of their truly and terrifyingly powerful king. While this may have been commonplace for the Romans, albeit overtly and horrifically tyrannical, it was downright blasphemous for the Jews. And, while yes, Jews did have kings, they were certainly not considered divine. Given the first of the ten commandments from YHWH (or God) being, “You shall have no other gods than me.” Even the Israelites hoped for messiah was not assumed to be of divine nature. So, for Jesus to be called King of the Jews (or *Christos Kyrios*), was not only problematic for both Jews and Romans alike. It was also politically and religiously inappropriate. And, just downright dangerous. As we know and find here in Jesus' trial before Pilate the Roman Governor. For Pilate, Jesus holding the title as King of the Jews, gave him divinic authority. And thus made him both a sacred and a political rival and therefore a traitor. Which is why Pilate had him flogged, whipped, and mocked for all to see, as Jesus neglects to answer Pilate's most pertinent question, “Are you king of the jews?”

“You say that I am a king.” Jesus replies, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” So, (as Pilate later demands) what is truth? What does it mean for us to call Jesus King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In between my first and second year of Seminary I took a year off from my theological studies to more fully discern my perceived (but not yet claimed) call to the priesthood. During this time I had the pleasure of serving at a small church outside of Omaha, NE, Church of the Holy Spirit. Every Tuesday the rector and I would gather with a small group of parishioners at a Panera, for Theology Cafe. This Tuesday morning ritual grew to become a necessary balm in the midst of often unpredictable weeks. With it's dependable comforts of a warm fire, coffee, bagels, and of course good conversation and fellowship. But, one of the most enjoyable aspects of this routine became the one to two minute conversation I could depend on inevitably being drawn into with an overwhelmingly affable and leqasciouse gentlemen. This individual consistently made it his mission to remind me that Jesus loved me. One Tuesday morning,

while I waited in line to purchase my coffee and bagel, my faithful friend approached me and said, “did you know that if Jesus is King, and ruler of your life, that makes you a princess?” Chuckling, I told him that, “no I had not thought of this, but I guessed it made sense.” And, from that moment on my friend would greet me every Tuesday morning, “good morning Princess.” While this could be construed as a bit strange, it called me to consider what it meant for me to claim myself as a child of God, and God as Lord of my life.

Christ the King Sunday has always felt a bit problematic to me. Maybe it’s because I am not sure how I feel about associating Jesus Christ with an all powerful all ruling all authoritative monarch. Or, maybe it’s because I am not sure how I feel about power, rule, and authority in the first place. Or, maybe, more likely, it’s because I am afraid to hear Jesus’ answer to Pilate’s pressing question... “what is truth.”

As Pilate approaches Jesus on trial it appears as though he holds all the power (power over peoples imprisonment or freedom, over their life or death). As he stands over and above this poor Jewish man from a small nowhere town who was condemned from birth. Having been betrayed, denied, and left for dead by his own disciples. His fate in the hands of an unruly crowd and an oppressive dictator. It would appear as though Jesus has been left completely and utterly powerless. But, as we know from our story, in the end Pilate is the one left in fear and trembling. Trying to wash his hands of the whole ordeal, as he recognizes Jesus’ true divine power. Here, Jesus reveals the unstable, ineffective, and inevitably dangerous effects of dominating power that too often are revered and asserted in our earthly kingdom. Here Jesus shows us the truth of this kingdom, and the truth of the kingdom he invites us into. The truth that if we really want to gain, use, or enjoy power, then we need to start giving it away. From the manger in a stable to his ministry with the twelve and his teaching to the crowds up until today in front of Pilate Jesus invites and encourages us to find our freedom as we claim the truth. Freedom to let go of all this world tells us to cling to. Freedom to love not only our neighbors as ourselves, but our enemies as well. Freedom to have faith in one another and moreover the Divine presence that lies at the heart of each and everyone us, as we are created in the image of God. Freedom to claim our power in our truth, the truth that we can only hold that power in as much as we give it away.

If we are to claim ourselves as children of God and therefore heirs of God’s Kingdom, then we not only have a right to the benefits and enjoyment of that kingdom but a duty to share in its work and it’s reign here on earth. To make whole what has been for too long broken by bringing people together around a shared table. To speak truth to power by being honest about our past and hopeful for our future together. To share what we have with others as we allow our sacrifice to become our greatest gift. If this is what it means to be an heir and a member of the Kingdom of God, than yeah I’ll take my Panera friend’s greeting “good morning princess”, I’ll take it everyday. As I strive to join him so that we can keep working to build, to enjoy, and to share this kingdom together.