

“What is truth?” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
November 22, 2009 - Christ the King Sunday

The passage this morning from the gospel of John comes from one of the most difficult scenes in the whole gospel. This is Jesus on trial just before his crucifixion and while we hear this story every year during Holy Week we also get it in two out of the three lectionary cycle years on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Church year which we celebrate today. Next Sunday is our New Year’s Day, Advent I.

Now at the point at which we entered the gospel story today, Jesus had already been arrested and been presented to Annas and Caiphas the religious authorities who questioned him and then handed him on to Pilate with accusations he was a criminal who deserved to die. The circumstances are unavoidably painful and obviously unjust and unfair. The facts don’t point to crucifixion – only the fear does. And yet what I find amazing about this whole scene in John is how very calm and steady Jesus remains. While Pilate and others hammer him with questions, trying to reach their desired outcome or come to their own understanding of the situation – while they search and try to get as much information as they can in order to sort out this mess – Jesus gives them very little, word wise anyway. And while there is tremendous challenge and confusion in the story itself, there is also a beauty in the simplicity and strength of Jesus’ response.

“You are king of the Jews?” Pilate asks. “Why are you asking?” Jesus replies. “Your people brought you to me. . . So, what have you done, exactly?” Pilate wonders out loud. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus explains. “So, you are a King!” Pilate counters, thinking he has him. “You say that I am a King,” Jesus says, “But my kingdom is not from this world. I have come for the simple purpose of testifying to the truth.” And while that’s where the reading ended this morning, the next line of this gospel is important. “What is truth?” Pilate asks. And it’s with those words that the conversation ends.

So what does this mean? There are times when I read this passage and wish that Jesus had said more. I wish that he had shouted and waved his arms and stomped his feet and pressed upon Pilate what his kingdom was like. Sometimes, I wish Jesus had defended his actions – told Pilate why he had raged and turned over tables and why he had loved and healed on the Sabbath. I wish that Jesus had used a few more words – loud words and explained why the crowds kept gathering around him – not simply because he was a political revolutionary (not that there’s anything wrong with that) but they gathered because they were hungry and hurting and wanted and deserved something more in this world. And Jesus had that something more to give and so they came to him – by the thousands. That’s what was going on. That’s all that was going on – it wasn’t illegal or unfaithful at all. And so Jesus had a legitimate case! And even if those angles hadn’t got him somewhere he could have gone to the last resort. The one that only he could use – Jesus could’ve thrown some Almighty God at Pilate, threatened Pilate back with what God could do to him if he harmed his only Son. Think of all the options Jesus had -- he could have played this all so differently. But in the end, in the gospel of John’s end, Jesus didn’t fight it. Not the way I’d expect him to anyway.

Instead he stood there and while Pilate plugged away for answers, Jesus essentially offered little explanation, and few words. As far as I can tell what Jesus offered, what he responded with was himself. His presence. King? OK, but not like this world does it. Truth? Yes, but incarnate truth. Not detailed, wordy hit you over the head in order to prove it truth. But stand in front of you and be here and love even you sort of truth. It's how he'd done it all along. And that, according to John was it.

And it's with this amazing story that we end the liturgical year. Instead of a King who comes and fixes it all before we begin anew. . . .instead of a King who takes charge completely or sets it all right today – we have a King whose presence is his point. And so maybe that's true of us too. Something to consider as we approach a new year.

Now our words matter and the last thing I would want to encourage this parish to do is to be silent. There's enough of that going on around us. We have good news to proclaim and sometimes we need to defend ourselves, our faith, our understandings. Sometimes we need to explain our reasons for turning over tables in this world and I believe that the world needs to hear more from Grace Church. But today, Christ the King Sunday reminds us that there is also tremendous power in our presence; the simple offering of ourselves without a whole lot of words attached means something too. Jesus in his very being presented a different way of being in this world. By being at table with outcasts and sinners he said something without saying anything. And people heard him. By touching lepers he spoke volumes and healed bodies and souls. In feeding 5000 he proclaimed good news and modeled abundance without uttering a word.

There is tremendous power in presence. Jesus was a kind presence. A humble and forgiving presence. He was compassionate, open, honest and strong. He was prayerful, faithful, loving and true. And in the end which is the kind of end that has no end, his was a presence that changed the world and opened eternity for all.

So, Grace Church, what is truth?

Amen.