

What is Truth?

We are presented this morning with two concepts that we need to work out. The first comes from the church's designation of this day as Christ the King Sunday. The second is the meaning of the word truth which comes from our Gospel reading.

First of all, Christ the King Sunday is a rather new feast day designation. The Roman Catholic Church first marked Christ the King Sunday in 1925. It has moved around a bit and now is recognized on the final Sunday after Pentecost or the Sunday before Advent. That said, why do you suppose that the Church decided to look backward with its choice of Christ as a monarch instead of forward with Christ as some other kind of leader? There were certainly more monarchs in the world in 1925 than today, but democracies and dictatorships were ascendant. Most monarchs in our lifetime are ceremonial. They are figureheads that may embody a national identity but do not have any power to affect the nation outside of being a rallying point.

Why do you think that the Church would look as Christ as King and not some other designation? [some responses included the divine right of kings, kings are not elected, it may seem less authoritarian and more benign, etc.]

Each of the concepts that you have presented have great merit. Without knowing exactly what was in the mind of Pope Pius XI and those who advised him, I land most heavily on two of them. First, I think the Church has a tendency to look backward. There is always a sense that it was better way back when. The Church is particularly prone to look back at the first few centuries of the belief in Jesus as the Christ and idealize the first worshipers' liturgy and beliefs as more pure. The Catholic Church in 1925 was also looking backward to a time when the Church had more power in the world, before the rise of secular democracies and nation states.

The other reason may be the concept of kingship. As monarchy developed one politico-religious concept that justified the actions of monarchs was the Divine Right of Kings. Essentially, kings were appointed by God to rule over the peoples and that there was no one on earth to which they answered. If that is the case for a human king then Christ, who is the King of kings, would have absolutely unquestioned rule. While monarchy may be an outmoded form of governance, it has a more powerful connotation for Christ than the title of an elected official or that of a dictator.

As interesting as the discussion of kingship is the concept of truth is a vexing and important concept to wrestle with. In this age where truth can be relative, where news is fake, facts are maligned, and trust in most traditional institutions is low, how can we possibly know the "truth?" Even as Jesus speaks in today's Gospel, "I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." While we don't hear it in today's lection, Pilate responds to Jesus' statement by wondering, "What is truth?" Pilate's actions go on to betray his willingness to ignore his own truth, "I find no case against him." He allows the crowd to decide whether a convicted criminal or a man he judges as innocent, will be crucified.

If we are to live by the truth that Jesus testified to, how are we to do it and how are we to know what the truth is? Jesus testified to a number of issues, but there are many which he did not speak about. Some of those issues are ones that have been a problem for Christians since his time and some are particularly pressing today. I am going to call out some particularly prickly issues. For example, Jesus, despite being

called the Prince of Peace, did not say anything specific about whether or not a person should serve in the military. Early Christians would not serve in the Roman army. It was not until St. Augustine developed the theology of “Just War” that Christians accepted military service. Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality, yet churches have often persecuted gay people and there are Christians today who think a homosexual cannot serve in the ministry. Indeed, large numbers of Christians believe they should be put to death. Jesus had lots to say about money and especially about the evils of wealth and how it distracts us from the love of God. Yet, we continue to be fascinated with the wealth and celebrity. We cheat in business or play the lottery in hopes of gaining what Jesus spoke so strongly against.

So what is your truth? How can we discern truth from falsehood? How do you know how to live as God intended in contrast to what the world seems to value? [some responses are discernment, listening to God, looking to what has been written and preached over the centuries]

I am encouraged by the thoughtfulness of this congregation. You have clearly given this thought before this morning. As a Christian, I do my best to discern what God calls me to do by reading the scriptures, studying theology, pondering the lives of the saints, and studying the wisdom of our Christian forebears. However, I know I have been taught societal values that may be at odds with Christianity. I have also developed ideas outside of my Christian study that may be at odds with scripture.

It is not easy. That is why we study scripture. It is why we look to the traditions of the Church, especially those of the early church—patriarchs and matriarchs of antiquity. It is why we use our God-given intellect to discern through the study of the first two. It is why we always do this in community and never alone. For those who discern alone are subject to their own whims and prejudices.

Finally, it is why we look to Christ as the king of our heart and mind. He is the one we can trust to help us in our thinking and discerning. He is also the one who, when we get it wrong, looks on us with kindness and forgives our foolishness. Ultimately, we look to Jesus because in his humanity he knows our trials and tribulations. If we are willing, he can direct us back on the path where we act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God.¹ When we act with those three things in mind we are almost certainly living the truth of God.

¹ Micah 6:8