

LOOKING TRUTH IN THE FACE
II Samuel 23: 1-7; John 18: 33-37
Christ the King Sunday • November 21, 2021
by Pat Berger

Reign of Christ Sunday, or Christ the King Sunday: the day in the liturgical year where we celebrate Jesus as King. Comparatively speaking, this is a fairly new celebration in the liturgical year; it was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as one way of combating destructive forces of that particular modern age. "King" was not a title that Jesus coveted, or even cared for, but it was one that the people, and other kings, could understand.

This being the last Sunday of the church year, we are treated to some last words that are helpful in different ways as we look -- this one Sunday -- at Jesus as King. Our reading from II Samuel that Bill read for us records last words of David. As a king, David had his moments, both good and bad. As he prepared to die, he would have liked especially for us to remember -- well, he would like for us to remember the things about his reign that he would like for us to remember. It is always hard for human kings to handle their roles as God would have them do that: with justice and mercy and love. David was human; he didn't always manage to do that. We wonder how David's subjects heard his last words: "The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. . . . One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. Is not my house like this with God?"

His subjects might have rolled their eyes a time or two as they heard those words, but what came next might have caused hope for all of them: "For he [that is, God] has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?" So: there was hope for this people. Perhaps David really did know the source of his power and really did know about the kind of justice practiced by our God. There is hope for the people -- hope for us today as well -- because people then and people now, we serve a God who is faithful to covenant promises. Will God not cause to prosper all of our hope and our desire?

The King we celebrate this day, Jesus, is on trial as we begin our reading from the Gospel according to John. Pilate is acting as judge; that would be a part of his role as representative of Rome embedded in Palestine. Pilate is on kind of iffy ground here, and he knows it. Jesus hasn't done anything wrong, which Pilate knows, but the people want him prosecuted. So maybe Pilate can help Jesus to implicate himself. After all, if Pilate can't find some way to give the Jewish leaders what they want -- which is to have Jesus crucified -- just exactly how long do we all think he will stay in power? Can he muster a sufficient number of troops to deal

with trouble these leaders might cause if Jesus is not crucified? Whatever will they think in Rome if he can't handle this challenge to his control?

He had fears, the people under his rule had fears, and people have fears today. Sometimes it is political themes that get to us. Sometimes it is social issues. And, there is COVID. We say certain things because: what will someone think if we don't say it? Or we don't say certain things because: what will someone think if we do? Sometimes it happens in the church. "If people knew what I really think about _____ (you name your favorite issue. . .), they wouldn't let me serve on the Session." Or: maybe they would insist that you do serve on the Session? And so, we keep our mouths shut.

Jesus didn't play it that way. Especially in John's recording of the conversation, we encounter Jesus wanting, as David was on his good days, to be the good shepherd King, this time to Pilate. As Pilate looks truth in the face, he asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus asks him a question in return: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus is trying to dig deeper, trying to find out who Pilate really is: he wants to know The Truth about Pilate. Pilate could be straight with him; Pilate could tell him what was really going on; it would be okay. Unlike David's power, which was earthly, Jesus' kingship came from God who is just and merciful and loving; it would be okay. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice," Jesus said to Pilate. But Pilate blew him off: in the very next verse, Pilate said -- perhaps with his arms crossed in front of him and looking down his nose at Jesus -- "What is truth?"

We know what truth is. We know that Jesus -- as King, or Son, or Teacher, or Healer -- Jesus was given to us that we might be members of a community that is greater than any one of us alone can ever be. Jesus has made it possible for each of us, and all of us together, to face the truth about ourselves, about those around us who are also loved, about our faith and the faith of others, and about our world. And looking that truth in the face causes us to respond in justice and mercy and love: we will look at the abundance with which God continually gifts us and we will be grateful to be able to fill bins on Boxing Day; we will be grateful to help with a Habitat House; we will be grateful for coins that make a difference for people in our own neighborhood; we will be grateful for tasks that God puts before our faces in the next year -- puts them before our faces because God knows the truth about us, and we know the truth about us, and God knows, as a result, what we can do for the Kingdom. May it ever be so.

Let us pray.