

Christ the King
John 18:33-37
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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My daughter asked me last night if I knew how many days are left before Christmas. I did not know until she told me that there were only 35 days from yesterday until Christmas. All I knew was that Thanksgiving is this week, and in the blink of an eye it will be Christmas, and it will be New Year's Eve before I know it. If there are things you want to get done before the end of the year, there isn't much time left, and if there is anything you wanted to get done before the end of the Christian year, I'm sorry to say that there's no time left because today is the last Sunday in the Christian year. Probably no one had this day marked as an important deadline for anything, but there is some importance attached to this last Sunday of the Christian year as it is designated as Christ the King Sunday. On this day we give thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ who is the Lord of all creation and is coming again in glory to reign.

Jesus is referred to as King in several places in the New Testament, and our Scripture reading today includes one of those references. In some cases, these are declarations and expressions of praise like I Timothy 1:17 which says, **"To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."** Our Scripture this morning is a little different though. In this case, Pontius Pilate is making an inquiry about the title. He had been told that Jesus had made the claim that he was King of the Jews, and Pilate wanted to know if Jesus really had made such a claim. Pilate was appointed by the Roman Emperor to govern the province of Judea, and to stay in good standing with his superiors, it was in Pilate's interest to keep relative peace among the people whom he governed. That meant he didn't need any disputes among his subjects getting out of hand, and he also didn't need or want someone claiming to be a king to emerge as a threat to his power and authority in the region. Our Scripture picks up after Jesus had been arrested and after the religious leaders had condemned him. The priests brought Jesus to Pilate with hopes that Pilate would do what they didn't have the power to do and give him a death sentence. Let's listen to the Scripture now from John 18:33-37.

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate's line of questioning was aimed at determining whether Jesus was a threat to him, and though he did end up ordering his crucifixion, it wasn't because he saw Jesus as a threat. The rioting that might have broken out if he hadn't given the people what they wanted was the real incentive for his actions. Pilate could see that Jesus was not there to stir up political problems for Pilate or to try to rob him of his position. Jesus was interested in doing what he had been sent to do which was to bear witness to the truth. That's what he said to Pilate.

We don't hear the rest of the story in our text this morning, but on this Sunday when the church acknowledges the reign of Christ who is Sovereign over all things including the rulers, and governments, and powers on earth, we remember that after these events, God vindicated Jesus. To keep the peace and maintain his own position and power, Pilate sentenced him to death, and Jesus did not try to resist force with force or fight violence with violence. Instead, to the very end he bore witness to the truth that God's love is the only power that can finally stop violence and evil. In the voluntary giving of his life, he testified that God's forgiveness is the path to transformation and healing, and when God raised Jesus from the dead God proved that Jesus was right. God proved that the last King standing will be Jesus and that only his righteous rule will last forever.

As we listen to Jesus answering Pilate and telling him what he had really come to do, there is an application point here for the followers of Jesus because Jesus calls us to follow him in bearing witness to the truth. "Go and make disciples of all nations," Jesus said at his ascension, and "when you receive the Holy Spirit *you* will be my witnesses," he said in Acts. God's plan for communicating the truth that the way to new and everlasting life has been opened up through Jesus and that Jesus is bringing a whole new world where sins are forgiven, and the sick are healed, and captives are released, and the poor find relief - God's plan for communicating this good news is to send Jesus's disciples out as witnesses to the truth that we have seen, and heard, and believed. This is God's plan, and the call to be witnesses to the truth is a call that Jesus instructs us to commit ourselves to.

One question that we may ask ourselves today is whether we are truly and deeply committed to obeying Jesus's call to be his witnesses. Is witnessing to the truth with my words, and my life, and my actions a priority that guides the course of my life and decisions, or is it something that I think of occasionally and something that I'm only willing to do if it fits in and doesn't create any discomfort or inconvenience in my life? At first, it may not seem like a hard commitment to make because being a witness to all the amazing and wonderful things that God has done in Christ and to the hope that is ours through Christ is a joyful and wonderful calling. We have good news to share and it's fun to share good news, but we might hesitate to be fully committed to Jesus's call because it isn't always easy. There are powers in the world that we may encounter or people who feel threatened by the truth and may actively or even forcefully resist us and the message that we proclaim with our words and actions. This was the reason Jesus ended up in Pilate's palace.

Jesus showed us what total commitment to being God's witness looked like. It looked like showing love and acceptance to outcasts, which was a witness to God's abounding love and mercy and some rejoiced in that, but others were critical. It looked like calling out unfair treatment of the poor, which was a witness to God's concern for the poor and received as good news by some, but that witness also drew anger from those who benefited from injustice. It looked like calling people to trust that he had come from God to show the way to true life and fellowship with God, which was a witness to God's love and provision. Some people experienced changed lives because they believed that Jesus was the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, but others saw and heard his witness and wanted to kill him. Jesus's example shows that being a faithful witness can include both joys and sorrows, and if we are honest with ourselves and with Jesus, we may realize that we have not committed ourselves wholeheartedly and we have not fully embraced Jesus's call that makes real demands on us. If we realize this and we are troubled by it or if we just want to be more dedicated to bearing witness to the truth, the good news is that grace is available to us, and Jesus is ready to strengthen us and fill us up with power from the Holy Spirit. If we haven't been committed witnesses, we can decide to be today. With Jesus's help we can also become what we haven't yet become.

If we need help with our commitment, Jesus is ready to help, but it could be for some that we are plenty committed. We are plenty committed, but we're also tired or discouraged by that opposition and resistance that we encounter sometimes. Today maybe some of us just need to hear the encouragement to keep doing what we are doing because even when there is resistance, God can work and accomplish God's will and purposes through our witness. I read a true story about a Christian couple who found themselves experiencing resistance and opposition. It was posted in August on a Baptist news website about the experience of a Christian couple from the island of Java in Indonesia. The author wrote about this couple who were his friends.

"Suprpto and his wife, Kartini, [were Christians] who moved into a neighborhood in Jakarta where all the other residents were followers of Indonesia's majority religion. Wanting to become friends with her neighbors, Kartini baked cakes and took them to the families on either side of their tiny house. But their gifts were thrown onto garbage heaps at the edge of the dirt path, accompanied by ugly words of rejection and dismissal.

The witness of this soft-spoken, unassuming man as he told his story and his wife's story to fellow Baptists in their small church was hesitant, even shy.

He related that each Sunday morning, as he and his wife and their children walked out of the neighborhood, carrying their Bibles on the way to worship, men followed them with threatening insults and shouts of disdain, sometimes standing together, threateningly, to block the narrow passage. Over time, the taunts and tension faded away, yet friendship seemed illusive.

But, as Suprpto and Kartini continued to act neighborly, something remarkable happened. After four years, they not only had established several friendships, but often — sometimes each week — neighbors would come to their house to ask for advice about

their marriages or to seek help with their children. In the words of this Javanese miracle worker: ‘They join with us to patch our leaky roof during rainy season. They deliver greeting cards whenever we celebrate our sacred holidays. They invite our Christian children into their Muslim homes. They bring us cakes.’

This is not an anecdote asserting that one religion is better than another [the author says.] The religions in this account could have been reversed, and often indeed the unkind treatment does flow in the other direction. Rather, this is a true story ... I will never forget, a narrative about how love overcomes hatred.”¹

When we witness to the truth, like Suprpto and Kartini did, it isn’t always an easy road. It wasn’t always for Jesus. It wasn’t for this couple. It won’t always be for us, so we do need the encouragement of a story like Suprpto and Kartini’s, and we need the encouragement that comes from hearing again that Christ and the truth will triumph in the end. That is the encouragement that God gives to us today. Even if it puts you at odds with others, even if it means other people don’t “get” you and treat you like you’re a little weird, stay committed to your calling. Keep forgiving in the same way that you have experienced God’s forgiveness through Christ. Keep caring for the poor. Keep promoting justice for the oppressed. Keep praying for healing and laying hands on the sick. Keep inviting others to trust Jesus and submit to him and his way. Keep doing everything that you are doing to share God’s good news and to prepare for the arrival of Christ our King. God, who did not let Jesus’s faithfulness and sacrifice fail to bear fruit, will not let ours keep from bearing fruit for the kingdom either. Amen.

¹ —Robert P. Sellers, “A real-life story of the power of kindness to overcome differences,” *Baptist News Global*, February 1, 2021.