Who do we say Jesus is?

before reading

On Reign of Christ, or Christ the King Sunday, the church gathers to proclaim that Christ is King. This is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, before we start a new year next week with the first Sunday of Advent. Today the church announces that it bows only to Jesus the Christ. We declare that we do not give allegiance to any other person, principality or power claiming to be sovereign. And today our very real challenge comes in living out that profession.

I want to give you some background about this passage we’re about to hear: Several times you’ll hear the phrase, “the Jews.” In light of our strong relationship with the Jewish community here in Bethesda and with the conversations these past three weeks with Jewish leaders from here and Israel, this background is especially important. John’s fairly ugly portrayal of who he calls “the Jews” throughout his gospel have caused many to deem it anti-Semitic, and I think that it must be handled with careful concern so as not to become so.

A careful reading of the Gospel reveals “the Jews” to be a class designation, not a religious or ethnic grouping. Rather than referring to people of Jewish faith in general, the term primarily refers more specifically to those who were the Temple religious authorities. The rejection of Jesus by “the Jews” is seen to be not only the result of what he says and does, but because his healings, his pronouncements and he himself lacked the pedigree and professional designation of the religious elite. Jesus ate with sinners, touched unclean people, spoke to women and lepers, all things that put him at odds with the culture at the time.

This dialogue between Pilate and Jesus is unique to John’s gospel, but I see it often reflected in my own life. As I try to figure out who Jesus is, what God is calling me to do and who God is calling me to be in the world, I can’t help but notice how often God shows me the answer and how often I tend to ignore it.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus makes it pretty obvious who he is. The first words of the first chapter, tell us that the Word (Jesus) was in the beginning with God, that the Word is God and that he came to give life to all people. Jesus tells his followers again and again that he is the light of the world, the good shepherd, the living water, the bread of eternal life. Jesus tells Pilate that he came into the world to testify to the truth, that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Then Pilate goes on to ask his infamous question, “what is truth?”

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What is truth? Jesus tells us the truth over and over again, but what difference does it make if we do not live that truth in our lives? Who Jesus says he is matters greatly, but how will it make a difference in the world unless we live accordingly? What matters is who we say Jesus is.

This dialogue between Pilate and Jesus makes it clear that Jesus wasn’t executed for who he really is and was, because he came to bring peace and justice and offer the bread of eternal life, and that doesn’t sound so bad. No, he was executed for who people thought he was, for the threat he posed to the way they had structured their lives. Who Jesus is matters of course, but what matters almost more is who we say he is, who we show Jesus to be in our lives.

If we show Jesus to be God dominated by fear and mistrust, we are not showing Jesus to be who he is. This week we have heard politician after politician promise to close their doors to refugees fleeing war, starvation and terror... That's not the kind of kingdom Jesus is talking about, one that only allows people who think like him or look like him (although Jesus probably looked a lot more like a Syrian refugee than like you and me).

The concept of kingdom is radically re-worked in John’s gospel, from kings that profit from dominance and exploitation of power to a kingdom that puts relationship at its core. That’s a whole different perspective on kingdom. When kingdom is construed from the truth of relationship and not rule, from the truth of incarnation and not location, from the truth of love and not law, then Jesus as truth will ring true.

Jesus had no army, no empire. People called him a king to mock him and to get him in trouble. That title, “king,” is loaded with political, insurrectional, meaning for the Romans, who had little tolerance for any king but Caesar.

But Jesus does have a kingdom. A kingdom that’s not from this world. A kingdom where hospitality reigns, because when there was not enough food for the gathered crowd, five loaves and two fish became an abundant amount of food. It’s a kingdom where the leaders weep alongside their people out of love for their friends, a kingdom where a woman, scorned by her community and all alone at a well is offered not only conversation, acknowledgment of her human dignity, but also the living water of eternal life.

This is the truth to which Christ came to testify.

In intellectual terms we tend to think of truth in terms of reliability and dependability. In religious terms, we must allow truth to expand beyond that. New Testament scholar Emilie Townes says that it is possible to speak of truth as something that is done, rather

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2 http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3728
than something that is simply believed or thought of. Jesus changes the way we look at truth, the way we understand it, the way we encounter it. If truth is a life to be lived, not just a fact to be believed, how might that change the way Christ’s truth is present in our lives? Because the truth we live matters more now than ever.

The distinction John draws between the more intellectual understanding of the truth (represented by Pilate in this passage) and truth as revelation (which we find in Jesus Christ) is an important one for us as hearers of the Word today. Though important in helping establish and maintain social norms, this intellectual truth does not fill all our needs. If it did, what would we be doing here? We have a very real sense of need for a deeper truth, we are compelled to go beyond merely understanding and making sense and order in our world. We must seek to know God and live as active witnesses on this journey with God. Jesus’ life and mission are models of this for us. In Jesus, we learn that truth is not just a matter for quiet contemplation, it is fuel for faithful and living witness. It is something we do.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are invited to take a deeper look into what Christ’s kingdom would look like, does look like, will look like. As his crucifixion and resurrection make clear, Jesus’ kingship is indeed not of this world. We see in the news about how worldly kings take power from others: by winning battles, or at least through successful diplomacy. Jesus does not fight, nor does he allow his followers to do so. He doesn’t mount a defense against those who are against him. Instead, he offers an alternative. In his kingdom, peace reigns over war, violence is not the first answer, it’s never an answer. In Christ’s kingdom, no one will be turned away. Jesus’ testimony to the truth appears embedded throughout the story of John’s gospel, and in the next chapter the manner of Jesus’ death testifies to his true identity. Those who can see or hear the message of Jesus’ crucifixion see a true king.

I found myself thinking, when I sat down to read this passage on Monday morning, that there could not be a more timely text to reflect on after the atrocities perpetrated last week in Paris, Beirut and Baghdad and this week in Mali. We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. And the end result of that view is not life, which Jesus came to offer, it’s death. The ultimate weakness of violence, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not

3 Townes, Emilie; Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4; pages 332-336.

4 ibid

5 ibid
murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. This last part Roy shared with us last week: Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. This is the truth, the truth that Jesus lived and the truth that he came to testify to, so that we might live it as well.

And so we must beware of holding too tightly to our own version of the truth, myself included. Frederick Buechner reminds us that Jesus did not say that religion was the truth, or that his own teachings were the truth, or that what people taught about him was the truth, or that the Bible was the truth, or the church, or any system of ethics or theological doctrine. There are individual truths in all of them, we hope and believe, but individual truths were not what Pilate was after, or what you and I are after either, unless I miss my guess. Truths about this or that are a dime a dozen, including religious truths. THE truth is what Pilate is after: the truth about who we are and who God is if there is a God, the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself. That is the truth we are all of us after.

And the good news about this truth is something to be remembered: the truth Jesus calls us to, in this passage and in others, originates in God and not in us. It is neither relative nor provisional, it is in fact eternal and constantly being revealed to us in our lives and in creation. Truth can transform us, Emilie Townes reminds us. By looking deeply at ourselves, at the truth we proclaim with our lives, at who we are saying Jesus is, we look at what is right and wrong in our actions and attitudes toward others and within ourselves. We challenge ourselves to look beyond what we think, to the truth found in God as represented in Jesus. The truth that Jesus represents is found in God, who is love and grace.

Through his conversation with Pilate, Jesus tells us that it doesn’t matter who he says he is. He turns the question around on Pilate, telling him “you say that I am a king.” It doesn’t seem to make much difference to us who Jesus says he is, history has taught us that. What makes a difference is who we say Jesus is to us. How we are going to let Jesus live in us.

Jesus tells Pilate, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” those who listen to Jesus’ voice are led into truth and eternal life. This is always Jesus’ offer. But to receive it means facing the truth about our lives, the truth that Jesus holds up before us, the truth of who we proclaim Jesus to be, and whether or not that lines up with who Jesus is.

http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-truth
Next week the season of Advent begins. We will joyfully anticipate the birth of a baby boy, and the ways in which that birth will change the world. That boy came to witness to the truth that God is love. This truth and life to which Jesus calls us originates in God’s gracious and merciful love. Jesus reminds us of this important point when he recalls John’s opening verses. For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

And, I would add, so that we might live in the truth. We ask, with Pilate, “What is truth?” Truth is peace, truth is hope, truth is that through God in Jesus, life came into being, and the life was the light of all people. Truth is that light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. How will we let that truth live out in our lives?