

The Reign of Truth

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Today is the Last Sunday after Pentecost, the concluding Sunday of our Church Year, the day we set aside to anticipate the fullness of the Reign of God in Christ, the day we celebrate the recognition that Jesus is the One in whom it is God's pleasure to restore all things and to bring all people together in his most gracious rule. Today we celebrate the good news that Jesus is our King.

But as soon as we say that, we have to admit that Jesus is unlike any other king, any other political power, that we in our world have ever known. That unlikeness is made especially pointed in our Gospel reading today, this scene from John's story of the confrontation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

Pilate says to Jesus, "Are *you* the King of the Jews?" Because at that moment in the story, Jesus doesn't seem very much like a king—even the king of a conquered people, as the Jews were at that time. Jesus has been brought to Pilate bound, tied up, led along on a rope by the temple police and partisans of Caiaphas, the high priest. The temple party has come to Pilate to make some pretty awful accusations against Jesus, accusations strong enough, they say, to warrant the death penalty. If Jesus is a king, Pilate thinks, he clearly is a king who has no order, no subjugation, no *control* over his people—not like a proper Roman leader, not like Pilate himself. "Are *you* the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks.

And Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not from this world." The kind of kingdom Jesus rules is not the kind of kingdom Pilate recognizes, or indeed that many of us would recognize. The kind of kingdom Jesus rules—the kind of king that Jesus is—is something that goes beyond our usual expectations of politics, or government, or power. Jesus is a king who has come, not to *lord it over* his people, but to *serve* his people; Jesus is a king who rules, not from a *throne*, but from a *cross*; Jesus is a king whose power comes, not from his ability to *threaten* or *destroy* or *coerce* his subjects, but whose power comes from the *truth*. "For this I was born," Jesus says, "for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

This *truth* that Jesus testifies to means more than certain facts, or certain propositions, or certain statements—the truth that Jesus testifies to means something much more like a quality of relationship. The Greek word that John uses here is *aletheia*, and it literally means "to be unconcealed," "to be disclosed," "to be opened up." Those of you who know Greek mythology might remember the story about the river Lethe in the underworld: anyone who touched the waters of Lethe lost their memory, became closed in on themselves, unable to draw on the past and unable to relate to the present, concealed behind the blankness of an empty face. Truth, *a-letheia*, is the opposite of Lethe: it means being opened up, it means remembering and relating, it means offering what is most real, most genuine, most honest about yourself—and being ready to receive what is most real, most genuine, most honest from others. *Aletheia*, truth, means living together without deception, without hiding, without fear, with the freedom to share what means most to us, what we most value, what we most love. *Aletheia*, truth, means discovering that the openness of love is the way to God. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Jesus is the king whose gracious rule makes us free because he opens us to truth.

And it is in that gracious rule of truth that Jesus calls us, the church, to participate. The kingdom, the reign, what theologian John Cobb calls "the commonwealth of God," is a vision of life together in which all our relationships are touched by grace, all our relationships show forth in their measure the justice and the peace and the love of God. It is a life together in which each of us gives the gifts and skills and talents we have, and each of us receives the support and caring and sustenance we need. It is a *common wealth* in the truest sense of the word, where what we value most is the love-in-common that God

inspires and empowers and sustains among us. The kingdom to which Jesus calls us is a commonwealth of righteousness: right relationships, relationships of compassion and caring and love, with each other and with ourselves and with God. The kingdom to which Jesus calls us is a commonwealth of truth: *aletheia*, unconcealment, not hiding, being open together to the unexpected grace of God, being open together to the unpredictable gift of love.

And it is the *mission* of the church to grow that commonwealth among ourselves, and go out and share that commonwealth with the world. Everything we do as a parish is focused through the lens of that mission, the mission of Jesus, the mission of the commonwealth of the truth of Christ. Today, after our worship services, we will have our Annual Parish Meeting, which will be a time for us to think and speak together about the mission of Christ at Trinity, how we at Trinity have lived the mission of Christ's commonwealth over the past year, and how we will live it into the year to come. We will receive reports, written and spoken, from wardens and clergy and committees who have carried out the mission in the last year. We will elect new members to the Vestry, who will lead us in the mission for the next three years. And we will look at the budget—and the budget challenges—that describe our resources and commitments for the mission for 2010.

Not long ago I heard a definition of “budget” that made me see the whole church-finance thing in a new light: a church budget is a *plan for mission*. A church budget reflects in its columns of numbers the things we think are important, the elements of the commonwealth of Christ we're willing to put our resources into, the plan for what we're willing to commit to do the mission God gives us to do. When we put *X* number of dollars on the line in the budget for Christian Education, we're saying we think it is so much of the mission to help children and youth and adults grow in their knowledge and love of the Lord. When we put *X* number of dollars on the line in the budget for the building and the utilities, we're saying we think it is so much of the mission to keep this place of the beauty of holiness open and bright and warm to serve our members and the wider community with a ministry of space. When we put *X* number of dollars on the line in the budget for clergy, we're saying we think it is so much of the mission to provide ordained leaders who will call forth and raise up and encourage the gifts and ministries of all the members of the congregation in the service of Christ. When we put *X* number of dollars on the line in the budget for making outreach grants to agencies and services around the state of Virginia, we're saying we think it is so much of the mission to contribute to the work of justice and peace and right relationship and love in places we ourselves can't go. The church budget is a plan for mission; it's literally how we put our money where our mouth is in the church; it's a call to be true, open, genuine, fearless, in giving of ourselves for the commonwealth of Christ.

And that's what we have to talk about in the Annual Meeting today: what the budget means for mission, and what pledges mean for the budget, and what we can do to bring those things together. It is a challenge; but it's part of the way we live into the reign of truth in Christ, part of the way we “unconceal” what means most to us in our church life, part of the way we participate in the commonwealth mission of God.

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ. And we live into the mission of the reign of Christ when we meet together to grapple with things like budgets and finances and planning for mission. We live into the mission of the reign of Christ when we put our material resources to spiritual purposes, as we do in gifts and donations and pledges, as we do in giving bread and wine and ourselves in Eucharist. We live into the mission of the reign of Christ when we live lives that are open, unconcealed, generously genuine, belonging to the truth. May Christ our King grant this grace to us. Amen.