

The Feast of Christ the King
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
25 November 2018

John 18: 33-37

These have been very difficult weeks and months for the world. We have had 307 mass shootings in our country since the year began, including those at a Texas church (25), Las Vegas (58), the Borderline Bar and Grill (12), Tree of Life Synagogue (11), Santa Fe High School (10) Parkland High School (17) and many others. We have had horrendous fires in California, which left over 1,000 people dead and countless people displaced. There are thousands of unsettled and terrified immigrants at the Mexican border, trying to escape their own nightmares. And there is a general climate of contention, polarization, and fear in Washington and other cities in our country. As the days are getting darker and Fall anticipates Winter, another type of menacing darkness continues to advance around the globe. It is the darkness of those who kill in the name of religion. It is the darkness of those who ridicule, abuse, and kill those who are different. It is the darkness of those who are so filled with hatred that they will go to any extent to destroy anyone who is not like them, does not dress, think, or behave like them.

And as the days are getting darker in America, I find myself thinking that we need a better way. There has to be a better way for this world to go forward. We are imploding from within and the “center can not hold”. We need a leader to unite us and lead us the rest of the way home. Today we celebrate Christ as King. I cannot avoid thinking of the stark contrast between this Jesus who faces Pilate today and other kings, queens, and rulers of this world. He is the king born of a humble virgin in a humble manger. He is the king who was one of us, working an everyday job and spending his life with average folks, many of them poor, isolated, oppressed, and sinful. Jesus is a king who did not travel in luxury, did not enjoy the respect of the mighty and powerful, did not rub elbows with the movers and shakers of the world, and was not vested with the outward signs of royalty. He is the king crowned in thorns hours before he was killed. He was spat on, ridiculed, mocked, beaten, and crucified, and yet it is at this point of his trial and death on the cross that his kingship is most clearly and powerfully affirmed.

Pilate ridicules him and asks him if he is the “King of the Jews.” At best, this miserable man is only good for a few minutes of entertainment. Pilate knows he is a nobody, likely an innocent peasant caught in the net of the capricious Jews. Yet, even though he knows Jesus is innocent, Pilate doesn’t care enough to save him. He asks Jesus, “What have you done?” Jesus remains silent. This is the wrong question. Jesus is not on trial because of something he has done. He is on trial because of who he is. He is the rejected stone, he is the inconvenient fulfillment of a promise the Jews expected to be

fulfilled in a very different way. He is a King without armor, a warrior without weapons, a Savior without an army, a King whose kingdom is not from here. He is gentle, he is kind, he preaches love, and he is on the side of the poor. To the Jews he must be an impostor, to Pilate is at best a deluded man, to the crowds he is a bit of a distraction to break the routine of their miserable lives. A bit of show to help them forget how desperate their lives have truly become. Watching Jesus die is cheap entertainment. Who cares anyway? No body really believes him to be King!

They all want Jesus to prove that he truly is the King who was to come. And they want him to prove this by walking down from his cross, triumphantly, victoriously, unharmed, and undisturbed. They all want a mighty King who shows his strength through supernatural powers. If Jesus is who he said he is, he must reject this cross, he must vindicate his honor, he must affirm his righteousness, he must shame his oppressors, he must shake people free of their unbelief by supernatural means. If he is the King who was to come he must reveal his true nature by conquering his enemies, punishing his and the nation's oppressors, and by restoring the fortunes of Israel. He must be more powerful than David! This poor man on trial for his life cannot be the awaited King. He must be an impostor!

Yet, this ridiculed Messiah was the answer to the problem then and he remains the answer to the problem today. Christ came to build a bridge to God himself and he died to show us the way out of hatred and desperation, out of intolerance and misguided religiosity, out of empty ritual and dehumanizing dogmatism, out of any feelings of superiority that make us feel better and more righteous than others, out of selfishness and arrogance, out of desperation and powerlessness. He came to rescue captive Israel and he, even today, continues to rescue captive America, captive Europe, captive Africa, and a captive world. He came to save us from ourselves and to show us that death is not the end of the story, that suffering has a purpose only God sees, that God himself weeps when we destroy his perfect creation and treat others with the type of inhumanity we have seen these last few weeks. God weeps for those slaughtered in the name of religion. God weeps for those who suffer and struggle to cope with the aftermath of so much tragedy, destruction, and death.

Martin Luther once said, "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering... God can be found only in suffering and the cross... It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's." (As quoted by Stoffregen in www.Crossmarks.com) It is at moments when we are deflated and destroyed by suffering that we see God most powerfully in our lives. The thief at the cross is able to see Christ for who he is at a time when others have abandoned him, when he is the most despised, when there are few traces of his divinity

and all that can be seen is his dying humanity. The thief's acknowledgment of Christ's kingship came before the resurrection. It did not come at a time when Christ was healing the sick, multiplying the bread, walking on water or raising Lazarus from the dead. It came at a time when both sinner and Redeemer lay dying on a cross.

We celebrate today the feast of a King who came to earth to die a criminal's death to show us a better way. Martyrdom is in the very DNA of our faith. Today we grieve over those who have died, but today we also affirm that their death was not in vain. God will use their blood to wake us all up to the necessity of a more equitable and just world. God will use their deaths to inspire us to act on behalf of brothers and sisters around the globe who are dying every day just because they dare confess their belief in Jesus of Nazareth. Their blood, like the blood of many martyrs who came before them, will water the seeds of a new movement that will rediscover its need and dependence on Christ our king and our Savior. I pray that God will use their blood to lead us into a new reformation soon. A reformation of the heart and mind. A reformation of our souls!

My friends, many in today's church want Christ's divinity without his cross. They want Resurrection Sunday without Passion Friday. They want the escapism fantasies of the Prosperity Gospel. They forget that there is no salvation without the cross and no resurrection without Christ's death. In many ways we too try to avoid the cross and suffering of Christ by all means necessary. It is easier for us to see God when things are good and life makes sense. As long as Jesus is multiplying bread in our lives, we are comfortable and willing to accept his claim to kingship. But, my friends, we must be like the repentant thief and accept Christ's kingship even in our suffering and pain. We must allow him to reign in our lives. To be in Christ's kingdom is to willingly and faithfully place our lives under his rule, to abandon our lives to his mercy and to beg for his pardon and grace always, in moments of victory and in moments of anguish and suffering.

Today I invite you to pray for those who died and for those who suffer around the world. Christ is with us. He sees our pain and one day he will rule supreme. Hatred is only here for a season, our King is on the move, and he brings justice and peace with him. Let us await for him in joy. Our salvation is at hand! Our victory approaches! Our King is on his way. Amen!