

Christ the King, Year B
November 25, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

The past several weeks have upended any notion that the world as we know it is safe and secure. We need only to open the paper, start up our computers, or turn on the television to encounter a barrage of news reports about violence, terrorism, and natural disasters. Perhaps one can tune out the news of great suffering among people of other countries, like the genocide of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Buddhist Myanmar; the death of an estimated 383,000 people in the civil war in South Sudan; or the recent discovery of over 200 mass graves left by ISIS in Iraq. There are the heartbreaking photographs in the media of children starving to death due to the war and famine in Yemen, which give faces to the suffering we hear about. Before the midterm elections, the news included a focus on the almost 3,000 immigrants and refugees who are part of a caravan literally walking their way to the southern United States border fleeing their homes because of the poverty and violence in Central America. Still, the circumstances may seem so removed from us, and the problems so intractable, that it is easy to feel distance from the people who are experiencing it.

Then there are the tragic events that strike closer to home: the sudden destruction of the entire town of Paradise, California by one of three raging wildfires in the state, thankfully now mostly extinguished by heavy rain; 23 school

shootings so far this year; the shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, a country music bar outside Los Angeles, and a hospital in Chicago. In reaction to all of these tragic events we have felt shock and fear, wondering how best to respond and if anything we do can make a difference.

It is in the shadow of this fear that we read of Jesus being brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor charged with keeping order among an occupied people. In today's Gospel reading Jesus has been arrested, bound, and struck in the face before being brought to Pilate with unspecified charges. Pilate asked what seems like a straightforward question: **"Are you the King of the Jews?"** Jesus lived in Israel at a time when the Roman Empire ruled the land and Caesar was the Emperor, and it becomes clear that he and Pilate are addressing what it means to be king from two very different perspectives. Politically speaking, if Jesus says yes he is guilty of sedition, of attempting to put himself in the place of the recognized ruler. Yet theologically speaking, Jesus *is* the King of the Jews, for he is God embodied. Rather than answer with a yes or no, Jesus replies, **"My kingdom is not from this world."** Yes, Jesus is king, but not in the way Pilate is thinking. Pilate hears the word *king* and asks a clarifying question, **"So you are a king?"** This exchange reminds me of a tense scene in the movie *Cry Freedom* in which South African black activist Steven Biko is challenged by a

state prosecutor for trying to incite revolution. Standing across the courtroom from one another they address the assumptions of fear and violence:

State Prosecutor: But your own words demand for *direct confrontation!*

Steven Biko: That's right, we demand confrontation.

State Prosecutor: Isn't that a demand for violence?

Steven Biko: Well, you and I are now in confrontation, but I see no violence.

Once again, the words may be the same, but the meaning is different. Jesus explains, **"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 then asks Jesus the question we still ponder today, **"What is truth?"**

While in the United States we do not have a king, each of us has to choose to whom or what we will give our life and loyalty. Many people know that they are consciously making a choice. Others never ponder the question of where their ultimate loyalties lie. Yet we all choose. As the saying goes, *failure to choose is still a choice*. Throughout the Gospels Jesus makes it clear that we choose, again and again, how we will live our lives. How we choose is based in what we think is true. What will give me life? What will keep me safe? What does it mean to be secure? What is worth my days and years, my love and loyalty? Jesus does not answer Pilate directly when asked what truth is. Instead Jesus lives and dies his response. Those who know the Gospel of John hear the echo of Jesus' words, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."** Why does Jesus not make the right

choice abundantly clear? Why is there little direct debate, confrontation, sales pitch, or theological persuasion? Why doesn't Jesus simply eliminate all doubt with miracles and revelations and God speaking unmistakably from heaven?

Jesus comes to a world in which the threat of violence is answered with more violence. In contrast, Jesus responds to violence with love. It seems like such an ineffective strategy. But Jesus is God and, as the Bible tells us, God is love. What we see God do more often than not is work through inference rather than direct confrontation, through relationship rather than by force, and through love rather than logic. I think Emily Dickinson had it right when she chose poetry to say,

**Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—**

Jesus tells all the Truth but tells it slant so that we have a chance and a choice: to see, to hear, to listen, and to respond in love. He is Christ the King, a king like no other, for he *is* the Truth. He is God.

Amen