

Christ the King Sunday (Last Pentecost) - 22 November 2009 - Proper 29 B
2 Samuel 23:1-7; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37
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It's over. It's done. It's finished. Hearing today that this is the Last Sunday of the season of Pentecost, people in church, like you and me, are reminded of an experience very familiar in many areas of their lives. Where health, or love, or marriage, or job are concerned many people today more familiar than they'd like to be with the concept of a last day. This makes today especially important, then; because it reminds people that 'last days' and sudden endings have very different meaning in the kingdom of God than they do anywhere else.

Today is indeed the Last Sunday of Pentecost. Today is also the Feast of Christ the King. In 1925, with fascist dictator Benito Mussolini rising to power right outside his door, Pope Pius XI called the Roman Catholic Church to the observance of this Feast. In short order, the Protestant mainstream, such as our beloved Episcopal Church, adopted the Feast Day of Christ the King into our own liturgical year. The Feast is a reminder that in the maze of their various loyalties, Christians' first allegiance belongs with Jesus Christ. And I suggest that the Feast Day's location on the Last Day of the liturgical year, gives it even greater significance, perhaps especially now.

There is a phrase used often to describe this phenomenon of our culture you may have heard it yourself; it describes the context in which live as a 'disposable society.' Much of what people purchase these days with their hard earned money, or with the hard-earned money of their parents, is fully expected not to last. Cell phones, MP3 players, coffee-makers, counter-top appliances, power hand tools, and, the best example of all: computers - people accept the likelihood that these will either fail or become obsolete in short order, sometimes in less than a year.

But if technology were the only area of life to which disposability applied, it might be tolerable. It would be, and it is, expensive. But it might be tolerable. The real problem with a disposable society is that it trains people to expect other things in life to fail after a similarly short time; it teaches people to expect other things in life, too, to become obsolete, maybe even themselves. Jobs are terribly temporary, especially now. Physical health, financial

security, love, marriage, family, there is much in people's lives that teach them that these things are socially disposable, that even they themselves are socially disposable; and not enough to assure them otherwise.

But if the Last Sunday in Pentecost resonates with their experience of the disposable, the Feast of Christ the King sings of something else altogether.

"These are the last words of David...." So opens our Old Testament Reading for this morning. This is David, the great king, the greatest king of the people God, ever. David defeats personal adversaries one after another, he leads the armies of his people to glorious victories, he unites the peoples into a true nation. Yet, he is remembered most of all for the one thing that underlay his military might that one thing that guided the exercise of his political authority; that one thing from which his confidence had always grown, he is remembered and revered for his relationship with God. With his final words, he directs those who will rule after him to do so in the fear of God, that is, in awe of God. For as he says in his final words, David has found that, perhaps unlike anything else on earth, certainly more so than anything else in life, the faithfulness of God, is 'everlasting, ordered, and secure.' 'Everlasting, ordered, and secure:' listen for a moment to the sound of these words. Repeat them in your mind, I'll repeat them in mine. We can let God speak them to our heart. Everlasting, ordered, and secure.' How do you see these showing up in your life? How do I see them in mine? In the midst of much around us that falls away disposable, how does it feel to hold tight to what is 'everlasting, ordered, and secure?' How much more wonderful still, to let go, and find ourselves held by it.

In the terms of John's revelation, it is finding, in a personal world of chaos and impermanence, the presence of the One who is the Beginning and the End, the One who is, who was, and is to come. At each 'last day', at every sudden and unwelcome ending, the sovereignty of God offers something more. It is the mystery represented in this very day.

And it is this mystery that defines the drama that we hear today unfolding between the Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ. In Jesus' day, Pilate is the Roman governor over the southern region of Jewish Palestine. Because the Hebrews are a conquered people, their leaders are denied the authority to pronounce a death sentence on someone. The Romans reserve that authority to themselves. But the Hebrew religious leaders want Jesus dead. Jesus is stirring up trouble, and they fear that if they allow him to continue, he will stir up even more. So they accuse Jesus of religious crimes in order to turn his own people against him. Then they accuse Jesus of political crimes in order to get him arrested by the Romans.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks. Under Roman law, only the Emperor may lay claim to be the people's king. If Jesus truly claims to be the Jews' King, then he is guilty of insurrection, and Pilate can have Jesus executed for it. It is a highly charged moment in time.

At least, it should be. But then, where are Jesus' fear and panic? Where is Pilate's zealous wrath? Jesus tells Pilate here, "I came into the world," he says, "to testify to the truth." "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me." Maybe this is why Jesus asks Pilate earlier on, "When you ask me if I am King of the Jews, are you asking because someone accused me of saying that? Or are you asking because you really want to know?" Jesus is asking Pilate, 'Does the truth matter to you, or does it not?'

And it seems to me that Pilate's relative lack of interest in either punishing Jesus for a criminal offense, or for letting go an innocent man falsely accused, shows that the truth matter very little to him, if it matters at all. The reading does not include it, but it is important to note what Pontius Pilate says next. Jesus tells Pilate that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to Jesus' voice. And Pilate responds with a question, a classic question: "What is truth?"

But is it a serious inquiry? Does Pilate genuinely not know what is truth and genuinely want to know it? Or is his question more a rhetorical barb; not really, 'What is truth?' but, 'What does truth really matter?' Pilate's response strikes me as something born of a political cynicism. And I don't mean here a cynicism that only a professional politician can have. I mean a personal world-

view, a policy about the world and life in general that holds that nothing exists that does not end; that for everyone, the last day of life itself in the present age is the last day of life forever.

For Pilate, for anyone embracing such a cynicism, truth itself is disposable. And for them, this makes everything and everyone around them, including even themselves, disposable, too.

It's over. It's done. It's finished. People are hearing it, reading it, facing it too often today. It is to the culture of the disposable, it is to people embracing it, to people giving in to it, and to people suffering the effects of it, that the truth that Jesus speaks continues to lift its voice. Things are ending in people lives all around us, and in our very own lives: health, marriage, job, things we *thought* we knew would never end.

And in the midst of it, here comes along this little day in the calendar of the Church's liturgical year. It has a special name, it has a special color; but for all this, it is still familiar. It is similar to the previous Sunday and next Sunday will be similar to it. And the familiarity of this Sunday and of last Sunday and of the next, rings in our ears, shines in our eyes, touches our hearts with everlasting ordered assurance that God has us; that God is with us and that we are with God.

And if on no other day, then at least on this one, the Church reminds us of the sovereignty of Christ our King. This day reminds us that the first loyalty of God's people is to Christ Jesus; and it reminds us that Christ's first loyalty is to all God's people, including you and me. This day reminds us that at every 'last day' Christ Jesus is with us; that Christ Jesus is still overpowering the finality of every sudden end; and Christ Jesus is still calling us, guiding us, even still carrying us, to a new beginning that God is still creating for us right now, right inside tomorrow.

Now may Almighty God, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall find our salvation, and in quiet confidence shall be our strength, preserve us in that heavenly presence where we may be still and know the reign of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.