

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—25Nov18
Jn 18/Christ the King
“Bound for Eternity”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

One feature of our church calendar can be seen in the transition that takes place today.

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year, when we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. At this service, we are remembering the Risen Christ who ascended to Heaven and now has authority over our lives.

Then, next Sunday, a new Church Year begins. The Advent lessons and music in our services for the next four weeks will anticipate the birth of the Messiah who—as we recognize today—will eventually come to reign in glory. In other words, the story of Jesus that ends today begins again next week.

Now it is curious that this passing from one year to the next will hardly be noticed—even by us churchgoers! We’re more likely to remark upon the arrival of the Chinese New Year than we are to observe our Church’s calendar. There won’t be any New Year Eve’s parties for the Church!

In fact, our observance of the First Sunday in the season of Advent will be vastly exceeded by the secular celebrations that we’ll enjoy a few weeks later, on December 31st and January 1.

As it happens, though, the Gospel lesson today suggests a perfect transition from the end of one church year to the beginning of the next. In that lesson, Jesus finds himself on trial for his life before the Roman governor of Israel, Pontius Pilate.

Jesus and Pilate are discussing whether Jesus believes that he is the new king of Israel. If that is really his conviction, then he would represent a threat to the Roman authorities. Pilate presses the issue and asks Jesus point blank if he is a king.

Jesus replies with these words: “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.”

In other words, Jesus doesn’t aspire to be a king in the sense that he expects to be a political leader who controls the government of Israel. He knows that the best he can hope for is a crown of *thorns*!

But Jesus does imply that he is a “king” in the sense that he’s a spiritual leader who has a unique ability to “testify to the truth.”

Think about that for a minute. Christ came to earth to tell us what is true. To “testify” to that truth—to swear that this is the deepest knowledge that we can have. This is the truth for us to live by.

But knowing the deepest truth is a challenge. And in the particular time we live in, it is a particular challenge.

In politics, for example, there are many accounts of “truth.” As we are well aware these days, the accounts conflict with each other. It’s hard to know sometimes which politician is “testifying to the truth.”

By the same token, there are many accounts being offered of *religious* truth. It’s no wonder that we are frequently warned to avoid talking about both politics and religion at the Thanksgiving dinner table! The issues today are so complicated that sometimes it’s hard to find even one person who thinks about politics and religion the way that you do.

Nevertheless, we are Christians living in a democracy, and however difficult these subjects are, we need to discuss them. And there will be times when we will be called to take a stand and say unpopular things.

But to do that, we will need to be in touch with our *personal* truth. That means that we will need to ask ourselves some basic questions: Who am I? Where am I going with my life? What choices can I make that will orient me to what is true?

Going further, I can ask: how can I testify to the truth that I have found when I'm relating to other people? What are the ways that I can be more "myself?"

For example, are there ways that I can be more *honest with my friends*? How can I gently point out their poor choices? And how can I acknowledge my own failings?

Asking ourselves such questions is what the Church calls, "*self-examination*." Self-examination allows us to scrutinize what in our inner selves might need improving. It's particularly useful to take stock of who we are and where we are going at this time--before we get immersed in the secular celebrations of the season.

"For this I was born," Jesus said, "and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Jesus was testifying to the most profound truth: that in the world of time, we can glimpse the eternal.

Now there are many in our culture who say that truth is relative. They claim that each person has his own truth. In contrast Christ proclaims one truth - the universal truth that we are all part of the Kingdom of God.

For this, Jesus was born. We should remember that as we begin the new Church year, and we prepare to celebrate the Birth of the one who leads us into all truth.

Now, of course, we do have points of view! But Christians still have a window into what is True with a capital "T."

For example, for us, loving our neighbor is an absolute ethical demand. It isn't negotiable; it's not a matter of "our point of view."

By the same token, we believe there is a transcendent force in the universe—an all-powerful presence for good that we call God.

That isn't just our opinion—it's a truth that we testify to.

The first Thanksgiving was a time of taking stock. Pilgrims who emigrated to the New World came to be able to live according their religious truth. (As it happens, their religious truth was suppressed by the spiritual ancestor of the Episcopal Church, the Church of England! But that's another story!)

Since many of their fellow settlers had died in the harsh conditions of New England, the survivors had no trouble recognizing their good fortune just to be alive. As the Pilgrims enjoyed their first Thanksgiving dinner, they could feel gratitude not just for their freedom to worship but for their sheer existence.

This Thanksgiving weekend is a good chance to give thanks for our own survival. Here we are, by the grace of God. We have been granted time to enjoy the world God has made, and to serve God and our neighbors.

In Jesus Christ, we are given a glimpse of a divine truth that surpasses all human truths. In Christ's life and death, we receive inspiration to testify to the truth in our own day.

And, finally, while we give thanks that we are here on God's good earth, in a rich and bountiful country, we also recognize the Kingdom that Jesus presented to us—the Kingdom that is our destiny. While we are creatures in time, we are bound for eternity.

Amen.