

Christ the King Year B: 24 / 25 November 2018  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY 13323  
The Rev. Gary Cyr

**“Can we courageously embrace the fullness of who we are and give witness to God’s abundant grace? Can our words and actions be such that when people see us they see Jesus? On this feast of Christ the King, may we find such courage and be faithful witnesses.”**

2 Samuel 23: 1-7  
Revelation 1: 4b-8  
John 18: 33-37  
Psalm 93

At a recent Deanery meeting, as I was leading Morning Prayer, I decided to do the Psalm appointed for the day antiphonally by gender, that is, divided between male voices and female voices. One of my colleagues teasingly said he wasn't sure which grouping he belonged to. That generated a few good-natured laughs and no offense was taken nor meant. It did, however, point to the tenuous social conversation around gender and gender identity in general that he and I hold different views about. It also allowed me to ponder a deeper more biblical question: “But who do you say that I am?”

That's a familiar question we hear Jesus asking his disciples in the synoptic gospels (MT 16.5; MK 8.29; LK 9.20). Though not in the same context as the synoptics, John's Gospel does ask a similar question though in a more roundabout way: in the exchange between Pilot and Jesus. How we identify and what we identify with are essential questions of faith. We hear that importance in Pilot's somewhat sarcastic approach with Jesus where the difference between accessing facts and seeking truth is exposed.

Facts and truths are interrelated concepts but not interchangeable. Each is a facet of reality dependent upon one's lived experience. The fact is Jesus never refers to himself as a monarch. We can comb through the gospels for verification. That's what one does: research to prove / disprove a hypothesis. Is what we learn in our search verifiable? Can it be tested and if so will it hold to said hypothesis? Pilot, through his interrogation of Jesus, is seeking to test what he has been told by the religious institution as well as others. He seeks to ascertain whether Jesus is a rival to Harod and Caesar. If so, than he is a threat to the civil ordering of society under Roman rule. If not, then he is simply an antagonist to his own religious

community, so they will have to deal with him under Temple Law. Pilot is seeking out Jesus' identity, not from outside sources, but from the primary source. He is testing a hypothesis. That is what one does when they fact find.

The titles we often associate with Jesus that the authors of the gospel use over and over are ones that were appropriated and used by Imperial Rome as descriptors for Caesar: i.e. Son of God; Son of Man. Titles found in the ancient writings of Israel and used to identify their messiah – their liberator. Something Caesar was not. However, it made for an effective literary tool to convey Jesus as the counterpoint to religious and cultural expectations. Jesus was no battle-hardened warrior. His reply to Pilot was simply to say that his kin-dom was not of this earthly world. That was not to say he self-describes as a king. Only God is the true king of Israel. And there's the rub. Here's the crux of the problem with the religious establishment which fostered discord within the social order and hence a problem for Rome. How does one prove, factually prove, that Jesus is God Incarnate?

Herein lies the intersection of fact and truth as aforementioned, where they are similar yet not interchangeable. Difference between them is intellectual truth is akin to fact finding while a revealed truth is one of belief which is verifiable through one's actions, through one's lived experience. Jesus, as God Incarnate, may not be verifiable via intellectual truth, but as revealed truth is verifiable by our embodiment of Jesus' message of justice and radical love. Remember Jesus' admonition?

Love God, love your neighbor, and while you're at it, love yourself.

Pilot sought to ascertain Jesus' identity through intellectual truth seeking, a fact-finding mission. And there was no plausible way for Pilot to convict Jesus simply on hear say and hyperbole. Jesus, in turn, never accepts the claim laid at his feet. Instead, his pronouncement is that God's kin-dom is not of this world, because this world, personified by Caesar, is predicated upon power through conquest, where might makes right. *Pax Romana* – Roman peace built upon subjugation of others through military strength – the very ideal of empire building – is not the kin-dom of God, for in the kin-dom of God it is justice, mercy, and love that are valued. It is about the just and proper use of authority and leadership that facilitates community and relationship building devoid of envy and greed, the twin seeds of ego-centric power and the root of so much conflict.

Pilot, the civil authorities, the religious institution all wanted to identify Jesus as a threat, a rebel rouser, to label him a fraud and deceiver. They sought to mock and silence him for the belief that he embodied God's mercy and love for all creation. Jesus professed a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, aspects of which are attributable to God alone. The idea of a transcendent God and an immanent God paradoxically coexisting and embodied in Jesus was anathema to the powers of his day. The revealed truth for us today, as Christians, is that this mystery of the Incarnation remains viable along with the tangibility of the lived experience. Thus, God is both transcendent and immanent and Jesus embodies this revealed truth.

This is not a question about an intellectual truth; this is about a revealed truth. One that is manifest through our lived lives of faith; through our identity as Christian, as followers of Christ Jesus. But it's not our first identifier. It is one among many.

In an interview I recently watched, I had the opportunity to see the late theologian James Cone being questioned. I listened as he explained to the interviewer that, though he is a Christian, he is first a black man. A black man who, through his lived life, experiences Jesus by which he is transformed and thus a Christian. For James, the first and primary identifier was his ethnicity. Not the fact he is a follower of Jesus. His lived experience as a black man in North America is primary. Everything else follows from that. What the Rev. Dr. Cone was saying is that his lived experience as a black man living with and under the shadow of slavery and subjugation is the lens through which he views the world around him. It is the lens through which he encounters the bible and Jesus' message of liberation from oppression. That is the quintessential meaning of the Black Church, from which I have learned much about theology as well as myself. Most people don't think about the lens through which they see the world because for many, they aren't a disenfranchised or disempowered group. The Rev. Dr. James Cone helped me understand and appreciate, that as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have my own particular lens through which I see the world around me, through which I experience the bible and Jesus' message, and why it was such a trigger for me when my colleague joked about his gender "identity." Whatever our primary identifier is, that is the principle lens through which we see the world and experience reality. It is through that lens we encounter Christ Jesus.

If I have one take-away from today's gospel, it's to own my principle identity. To not let another determine for me what that identity is, nor allow another to label me according to their

standards of decorum and expectation. Jesus didn't let Pilot nor the powers that be, determine who he was. Jesus knew his identity and it was aligned with that of God, not as a king or with temporal power. He was aware of that when he asked his disciples the question: Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks of us: "Do we have the courage to embrace our identity, the lens through which we see the world, from which we seek to faithfully worship the God who calls us beloved? Can we courageously embrace the fullness of who we are and give witness to God's abundant grace? Can our words and actions be such that when people see us they see Jesus? On this feast of Christ the King, may we find such courage and be faithful witnesses.