

Title

November 22, 2015 – Christ the King (Year B)

First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN

Text: Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18:33-37

Grace to you and peace from God who is and who was and who is to come and from Jesus Christ, our Savior, Lord, and King. Amen.

I don't know about you, but the past week and a half has not been easy for me. On November 13, the West was stunned when 136 people died during terrorist attacks in Paris, France. That same day, 19 people died in a Baghdad suicide bombing. The day before, 43 were killed in Beirut, Lebanon. This past week, more than 50 were killed during attacks in two Nigerian cities. On Friday, at least 27 died in Bamako, Mali. In addition to all these lives lost, hundreds of people were injured and countless more had their lives forever changed. In the past week and a half, I could hardly turn on the news or the radio or social media without being reminded of these horrific incidents. My Facebook wall was full of French flags as well as criticisms for the disproportionate attention given to Paris. I saw an outpouring of support for our French allies and a backlash against Syrian refugees trying to flee this same type of violence. During this time, we also saw yet another unarmed Black man killed by the police – this time even closer to home, in Minneapolis. This past Friday was also the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, when we mourned the at least 271 trans* children of God who were murdered during the past year. These past couple weeks have been nearly overwhelming. It has been said that one should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, but recently the newspaper has been almost too much to bear.

So, on this festival Sunday, I wonder what it means for us to proclaim Jesus Christ as our King? What does it mean to pray the Lord's Prayer and say "your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven"?

Today's Gospel reading comes from John's account of Jesus' trial – just hours before his death. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province, interrogates Jesus about his kingship – not because he is interested in Jesus' life or teachings, but because he is wondering if this poor wandering preacher is a threat to the greatest empire the world had ever known. Probably not helping his own cause, Jesus never quite gives Pilate a clear answer. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus said. “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the [religious authorities]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

For many, proclaiming Jesus as King means rejecting earthly authorities and waiting for some coming heavenly kingdom. This can lead to some sort of escapism where one disavows earthly problems and waits for Christ's second coming in glory. And honestly, in times like we have seen recently, that alternative could be very appealing. But what if the Kingdom of God is not just some future event, but here and now? What if Christ's reign is showing us how to engage in the world, not recoil from it?

The international reaction to the Paris terrorist attacks was perhaps somewhat predictable. People were shocked that such a thing could happen. The world stood in solidarity with the Parisian people with French flags and singing La Marseillaise. But soon after, the bombs started falling as our sadness turned to anger. Literal bombs fell from military jets and figurative bombs fell on innocent people. Anger turned to hatred against Muslim people whose beautiful religion was hijacked and perverted by these terrorists. Leading presidential candidates suggested that we should shut down all the mosques or establish government monitoring of Muslim-Americans. To date, 31 governors have stated they would not accept new Syrian refugees in their states because of potential terrorists “bad apples” that could come with them. Some suggested only

accepting Christian refugees, as if this were an action Jesus would take. The world responded with violence, fear, and hatred. Far too often, that's how the kingdoms of this world establish and maintain their power. But that's not how Jesus' kingdom is established. "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the [religious authorities]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." If Jesus' kingdom were from this world, it would be like the other kingdoms of this world and establish itself through violence, fear, and hatred. But Jesus' kingdom is not from here and Jesus is not like any earthly king. His coronation crown is not made of gold and precious gems, but thorns. His enthronement is not in a palace, but on Golgotha's cross. And this is Jesus' reason for coming into the world: he came to testify to the truth of God's radical love for all people. A love that transcends the boundaries our earthly kingdoms establish. A love that welcomes the outcast and houses the homeless. A love that is made manifest through the cross.

Perhaps one of the best-known witnesses of non-violence in the 20th Century was Martin Luther King, Jr. No matter the hatred or death threats or bombs used against him, Dr. King never resorted to violence. He wrote, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it...violence merely increases hate...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." We live in a world that answers violence with more violence; death with death. But we look to Jesus' kingdom that rejects violence as an answer and responds to hatred with love and violence with peace.

So in such a time of violence, pain, and uncertainty, we may ask, “Where is King Jesus?” Where is Jesus when the world seems too much to bear and hatred seems to be the norm? Where is Jesus amid the violence of Paris and Beirut and Bamako and Minneapolis? Where is Jesus when Black people and trans* people are murdered because of who they are? Where is Jesus when he seems the farthest from us? And then we hear the response, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come. I am with you when you mourn and I cry with you. I am with you when you fear and I comfort you. I bring love where there is hate. I am here with you now and will be with you in all the days to come. I call you to my table where I am in, with, and under the bread and the wine. I am in you and you are in me. Now go and testify to my truth and I will be with you still. Answer the world’s violence with my peace and its hatred with my radical and life-giving love. For my kingdom is not from this world, but it is for this world.’

So it is to be. Amen.