

The Last Sunday after Pentecost, CHRIST IN MAJESTY, Year B, Proper 29
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
November 21, 2021
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

Christ in Majesty

For the third Sunday in a row, our gospel takes place during Holy Week, the time between Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem on a Sunday and his execution on a Friday. For the second Sunday in a row, on this day that long ago would have been the second Sunday of Advent, we again hear apocalyptic tones and themes in our readings from Daniel, from the Revelation to John, and in our gospel. Again, there is a sense of the end of things, the culmination of everything, the ultimate things, and the end of time.

Today our gospel text comes from John's gospel rather than Mark's. It is the night or early morning before Jesus' crucifixion. It is a long and stressful and sleepless and convoluted night.

In John's account, on this night, after the last meal with his friends, Jesus is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, taken before the father-in-law of the high priest, then before the high priest. And while he is being examined by these Jewish religious leaders, Peter denies knowing him three times. And then Jesus is sent to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region of Judea, which includes Jerusalem.

In today's gospel reading of just five verses, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus five questions. Jesus asks him one.

Pilate's questions are these:

'Are you the King of the Jews?'

'I am not a Jew, am I?'

'What have you done?'

'So you are a king?'

'What is truth?'

The first four questions pretty much make sense as Pilate interrogates Jesus, trying to decide his case. The fifth question is a bit different, more of an existential query. Pilate asks Jesus the Christ: "What is truth?"

Is it a sincere question? Does he really want to know Jesus' answer?

Pontius Pilate has the authority to order executions of subjects of the Roman Empire. His interactions with Jesus and the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for Passover that week are marked by fear and anxiety. Pilate deeply wishes to avoid culpability and responsibility for the death of this itinerant prophet from Galilee. Remember how later he washes his hands? Why is he so fearful? Could it be because he fears or maybe even secretly hopes that Jesus is indeed a revelation from beyond this world?

“What is truth?” Pilate asks. Does he want to know what Jesus thinks, what Jesus knows?

Pilate, it seems, fundamentally misapprehends the nature of reality. He deals only with life and death. As a political appointee, he is of course concerned about power, status, influence, appearances—in this life. He's afraid of losing those things.

He also, most likely, deeply fears death. For in his mindset, when death comes to him as it will come to everyone, all that he treasures will be lost because death for him is the end.

Jesus knows something else. Jesus knows something different. And as his followers, as those who belong to the truth and listen to his voice, so do we.

It isn't only life and death. It is life, death, and life again. More life, different life, mysterious life, but life, nonetheless. Life which at death is changed not ended.

This is why Jesus is not only full of grace and truth but also empty of fear. He is fear-less. Fearless in the face of the tyranny of empire. Fearless in the face of those who do not understand him, his teaching, or the movement he has inaugurated. Fearless as he brings near a vision of God so intimate, so personal, so compassionate, and yet so inherently, absolutely, cosmic.

In this gospel today Jesus is still very much alive in his earthly body and earthly existence and yet, already, he is Christ the King. In John, we encounter the Easter Jesus from the gospel's start to finish. It's so different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, Jesus is presented to us from the beginning as the resurrected Christ: alive again, triumphant, confident, even in the midst of his passion as we encounter him in our gospel today.

Today, on this last Sunday of the church year, we begin our transition into the shorter Advent we and other liturgical Christians now keep: the four Sundays before Christmas and all the days between and right after the fourth Sunday, right up until Christmas Eve.

We have moved through the cycle of the entire year once more, and next week we will enter it yet again and start all over.

Everyone else can race right on into commercial Christmas if they want, if they must. Indeed, we can see all around us that many folks already have.

We, however, are not skipping any parts of the cycle. We are honoring the fullness and wisdom of our tradition which teaches that seasons of celebration are preceded by seasons of preparation, periods of reflection and self-examination. We don't just commence the party; we prepare for it. We don't just receive the baby; we work through and prepare throughout the pregnancy.

Some folks wish to avoid the longer, darker nights we are passing through since the time change as we approach the winter solstice. And if they think that darkness is only about death, if they think that this growing darkness we are living through is the darkness of the tomb, if they are fearful that the light may not return, we can kind of understand their eagerness to jump right into Christmas.

We are not afraid of the darkness of this season. We are not afraid of the dark. For we know something else, something different. We know it is the holy darkness from which fresh radiance is born. It is the darkness of the womb not the darkness of the tomb. Darkness is not the end of life but the beginning of new life. In the dark. We need the light, yes, and we need the dark. Both-and, a marriage of opposites.

And so we wait and anticipate in the growing darkness. We decorate the darkness with greens like those we will hang after coffee hour today. We could use your help if you're game; the traditional hanging of the greens. We decorate it with the deep and ancient blues of Advent, colors that look like midnight and the blue hour after sunset, colors that remind us of Mary.

We anticipate the coming of the Word made flesh in a baby born a homeless child of color to poor parents. We will celebrate his arrival at Christmas. And we will celebrate the twelve days of the feast of the Incarnation, the twelve days of Christmas. And after them, we will celebrate more as foreign dignitaries, distinguished Gentiles come to bring him gifts and pay him homage. And we will keep that feast of Epiphany. And after his baptism, come Ash Wednesday, we will begin to prepare with him for his earthly mission as an adult, including hard discernment and a series of temptations. In Lent we enter another season, like Advent, of preparation, anticipation, self-examination. And as Lent gives way to Palm/Passion Sunday, we will journey with him through the final week of his life and his passion which we taste once more in our gospel today. We will bear witness to his death, and we will bear witness to his resurrection as indeed we do every Sunday.

And after the fifty-day feast of the Resurrection—notice how the feast is always longer than the fast: fifty days of Easter, forty days of Lent—after that, after his Ascension we will receive the gifting of the Spirit at Pentecost. And then we will move through the season after Pentecost, the Sundays of ordinary or counted time for the other half of the year, studying

Jesus' life and living and teachings more deeply until we come once again to this last Sunday of the church year.

And then we will start again, as we dwell more deeply, more fully, more richly each year of our lives, each year of our walk in the company of Jesus the Christ and one another in the wisdom of, the life-changing power of his teaching, his life, his death, and his resurrection, and ascension.

As we round out one year, we prepare to enter the next in a ceaseless round of thanks and praise, of wonder and love, of abiding hope, of constant faith and trust in the Holy One, the Ancient of Days who loves us.

Jesus the Christ is the Alpha and Omega. He is the second person of the Trinity: with God from before the advent of time, present with God at creation, bringing God near in incarnation: through him all things were made, and continuing his life in God, with God, as God in the power of the resurrection.

On this last Sunday of the church year as every year on the last Sunday of the church year, we acclaim Christ the King, Christ in Majesty, the Reign of Christ, Christ the ever-living, ever-loving, reigning Monarch and Sovereign of all that is, seen and unseen. And we await his coming once more.