

Sermon
The Last Sunday After Pentecost: The Reign of Christ
Sunday, November 24th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-13 (14-19); Revelation 1:4b-8;
John 18:33-37

I had a wonderful conversation with a friend this week about short story writing. He said to me about a particular story he'd written: "I knew the ending before the beginning, and it was just a matter of getting there". This comment sent me into a swirl of reflecting on our Christian faith!

As Christians, we know the end of the story: we will always be on this side of the Resurrection. God has shown us that love wins. That love is stronger than death. That love is stronger than anything. We also know the beginning of the story. The beginning is love, incarnate in a tiny, vulnerable baby.

In the writing of my friend's short story, he knew the ending, and it was just a matter of getting there. There was territory that had to be traversed to tell that story.

It is for us, too, a matter of getting there: we have a story to tell as we navigate this world. Jesus showed us, in his story, brought to us in the Gospels, that this getting there will be full of both joy and sorrow. Both praise and lament. Both contentment and suffering. The territory to be traversed will be rough at times. There will be experiences that will stretch and even break us. Jesus shows us that with God, transformation is possible in all of it.

Jesus is our invitation to tell our story with God, with each other, and with love. Jesus is our reminder that our beginning and our ending is love, and that we are to choose love as we move along on that long, winding, path from beginning to end on this earth. We are to choose love, we are to choose connection, with God and with each other, with our world, and it is love that will take us from this world into the next.

Today is the last Sunday of our Church Year: The Last Sunday After Pentecost, when we celebrate the Reign of Christ. This was originally a

Roman Catholic Feast Day known as the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. It can be traced back to 1925, and its purpose was to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the “King of all kings” and as a way to bring God back into a secular world.

Many of you know that we follow a three-year pattern of readings in our Anglican tradition. This year we’ve made our way through the Gospel of Mark’s story of Jesus, with large portions of John’s Gospel along the way, including today’s scene with Jesus and Pilate. Starting next week, we’ll hear the story that Luke’s Gospel brings us over the course of the year, and the year after that we’ll hear from Matthew.

Why do we do this? Why do we follow a lectionary pattern of readings instead of choosing readings by theme each week? The major principle behind the lectionary is that on a Sunday, members of congregations should be able to hear the voice of each writer week by week, so that in any given year the writer of one of the first three gospels will be heard from beginning to end.

I’ve been listening to a lectionary pattern of readings on Sundays my whole life. I’ve made my way through the Gospels over and over again. Why do this? It’s a good principle that we would hear each of the Gospels from beginning to end over the course of a year on a Sunday, but there is a deeper invitation in this. It has to do with voices, with listening, with how we listen.

Whose voice are we listening to as we journey through this earthly life? Our lectionary helps us to listen. To listen for the voice of love – that voice of love is living word in our Scripture.

Theologian Howard Thurman said this:

“There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will, all of your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”

That sound of the genuine is God, with us, loving us, and inviting us to move in the world, to traverse the territory of this earthly realm the way that Jesus did: with love.

What sound – whose voice – are we listening to as we make our way from beginning to end of the story of our earthly lives?

“Whose voice are you listening to?” is actually what Jesus is asking Pilate in the Gospel passage our lectionary brings us today. We hear this:

“Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”(John 18:33)

Jesus gets right to the heart of things with this question. He knows that Pilate is all about power and control – worldly power, human control. He knows that there are other voices in Pilate’s head that are saying “Assert your power, Pilate!” and “Keep control...”.

God tells us through Jesus that truth isn’t found in power and control and certainty: it’s found in connection, and in relationship, with God, and with one another. This is the contrast between the kind of king Pilate was, and the reign of Jesus, and the kingdom of God. Pilate’s leadership focussed on independence and self-sufficiency, and on distance and separation for the sake of control. His rule relied on power that comes from violence and manipulation, and from punishment and domination. This is not Jesus’s way, not God’s way. Jesus shows us that it’s about not giving in to love of power, and being guided, instead, by the power of love.

In this same exchange with Pilate, Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world”. This is not about an otherworldly, future place. Jesus is saying to Pilate, and he is saying to us: “It doesn’t have to be this way”. It doesn’t have to be about control and violence and manipulation.

Jesus answers Pilate’s question “So you are a king?” with this:

"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."

Our lectionary doesn’t include it, but the very next verse has Pilate ask: “What is truth?”

Truth is found by living in loving solidarity. We live truth when the loudest voice in our head is God's voice, reminding us that we are loved, and that we are to love others.

Jesus says over and over again that "who's in/who's out/who's worthy or saved/who's not" is not the kind of relating that is at the heart of our humanity. God tells us through Jesus that truth isn't found in power and control and certainty: it's found in connection, and in relationship, with God, and with one another.

God invites us to hear a voice of love, louder than all the other voices. And, God invites us to be a voice of love: to speak love and connection and solidarity loud enough that people hear it over the din of power and control and disconnection in our world.

We gather here to listen. We listen through our Scripture, our liturgy. We hear the whisper of God's love our sacraments. We taste it in bread and wine. After our lunch today we'll have a Visioning Session. Part of our visioning is to understand how we, in our Anglican expression of Christianity, listen for love, and how we speak and embody that love.

We know the beginning of God's story of love in a tiny, vulnerable baby, and as we enter the season of Advent next week, we prepare to welcome that love incarnate again. We know the end of the story on this side of the Resurrection: love wins, love is stronger than death, stronger than anything. In our Collect this morning we prayed this:

"You who are, who were, who are to come, before whose judgement all that is not love fades away: save us from the violence that seeks to claim our hearts, so that we may hear a different voice and belong to you in truth."

As we make our way from the beginning to the end of our story as Christians here on this earth, may we trust that we are loved and that we are made to love. May we trust that before God, all that is not love fades away. This week, pause, and ask yourself "Whose voice am I listening to?" May it be love that you hear and feel, and love that you speak and enact and embody. In Jesus name. Amen.