

25th of November 2018
Christ the King Sunday

A number of years ago I was standing in front of Buckingham Palace in London, watching the changing of the guards. Nearby was a young boy who was peppering his father with questions. Finally, he asked, "What does her majesty do in that big house?" The father's answer was fascinating. "Well, she dusts and queens." I don't know if it was an intentional bad pun, or if the father was just about as perplexed as his son, and gave a quick answer. That brief moment has stayed with me because I suspect all of us are just as confused when it comes to monarchs. After all, we parted company with the whole concept of royalty in 1776, and even though we are fascinated by royalty, we really don't understand it. Sometimes we don't understand members of any royal family.

That seems to be what we find in our gospel lesson for this morning. We know the basics of the story. Jesus had been arrested, jailed, and charged with heresy and other crimes by the Temple authorities. It was clear they wanted to kill him, but only the Romans could authorize capital punishment. The next morning Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the charges and accusations made, and they demanded the Lord's death.

It becomes increasingly obvious that Pilate was not interested in a religious dispute among the Jews, because he began questioning Jesus whether or not he was the king of the Jews. In other words, are you a threat to civil order and stability, or are you plotting a revolt against Roman authority? That was his primary concern, because Pilate was the representative of the emperor and the empire.

And, it is certainly understandable that he would pursue this topic because Jesus had openly spoken about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. That one word, kingdom, had different meanings to the two men, and they became so polarized that they didn't have a genuine conversation.

Because of all that happened on what we now call Good Friday and Easter, Jesus prevailed, and the Kingdom of Heaven was established. The work begun by Jesus was taken over by the Apostles, and soon others were joining them. Despite hardships, persecutions, and terrible ordeals, it continued. It grew, it expanded its boundaries. In time, the Church became acceptable to others, then tolerated, then officially tolerated by 312 AD.

These three hundred years were known as the era of the Primitive Church. There was no central authority, no organization, no structure. One person told another about Jesus. They prayed together and invited others to join them. They celebrated the Lord's Supper together, and they heard the words of Jesus and took them to heart. They visited prisoners and the sick, looked after those who were suffering, fed and clothed those in need, and always extended the invitation. People congregated in homes to worship and discuss how they could take the message and deeds of Christ to others.

But that era abruptly ended a few years later when the Roman emperor Constantine proclaimed that Christianity was not the authorized religion of the empire. The Roman philosophy was 'gravitas' from which

we get out word grave. Not a spot in a cemetery grave site and burial, but serious, methodical, organized and structured. Romans had no tolerance for the confusion and diversity of primitive Christianity, and we see the results. The church was established; the bishop of Rome, living just down the street from the Emperor, was under his control.

The church became big business, with the government paying for churches and clergy, and in return, making certain that the church was the religious bureau of the government, doing its bidding. The more it became a structured institution, with individuals vying for power and control, the more it moved away from Jesus. It became corrupt when boys of 13, by fiat of their birth into the right family, had fathers who bought them the office of cardinal or archbishop.

Nothing better explains this than Dostoevsky's 1880 story, *The Grand Inquisitor*. In this tale, part of his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Jesus returns to Seville, Spain and resumed doing exactly what He had done in ancient Israel. It was His one on one, retail connection with people. He taught about God's unconditional love. He healed people. He worked miracles. And once again, He was arrested by religious and secular authorities.

The night before Jesus was to be burned at the stake the Grand Inquisitor of Spain visited Him in the jail. Basically he said, "Look Jesus, just go back to heaven. You're not needed here anymore. You're old-fashioned, out of touch with the modern world. You've been replaced by the Church."

There is the indictment: The Kingdom of God, lovingly established by the King of kings and Lord of lords, as progressively moved further and further away from the examples set by Jesus. A quest for power, inventory, and other things are getting in the way of simply living out the message taught by our Lord - love God with all you've got, and love your neighbour as you love yourself. Time and again, He explains it: take care of widows and orphans, spend time with people, connect with them, do what you can to make their life better. Teach people about God's love in words they can understand. Do good, don't advertise how good you are - just do good, and people will see it, get the message, and join in. That's how together we make a true impact that redeems, transforms, and makes a better world.

It is all so very basic, so simple, yet that was the precedent established by Jesus. His disciples got it, and that is how the faith in Jesus took root and spread from Jerusalem into Judea and then into the world. Paul got it, travelling throughout the Mediterranean Basin, talking with people, helping them build up a group of believers, instructing them, and raising money to help the suffering people in Jerusalem. It wasn't for himself because we read in Acts that he was bi-vocational. He made his living as a tent maker. By the collapse of the Roman empire in the west, it was too simple, too basic, for those in authority.

Sometimes we hear people say that we have moved into a post-Christian era. That sounds very frightening, and to a certain extent it is. But let's not cover behind a smokescreen of what has been called the Culture Wars. Let's not waste time obsessing over whether a department store wishes you happy holidays or Merry Christmas.

Rather, let's get back to the old basics - proclaiming the message of Christ crucified, worshipping God, and making one on one connections. In a world where acute loneliness is epidemic, where fear is rampant, and where anger has become a deadly contagion, they want to see the face of the saint and know that the care they get comes from a person with a servant's heart. When they are hungry, in need of employment, warm winter clothes they pray that someone will respond. They want someone to notice them and love them. They hope and pray there will be someone, especially this time of the year, standing at the Salvation Army Red Kettle, ringing the bell, inviting people to contribute to those who are in need.

I believe that is what makes any follower of Jesus relevant in the world; it is what makes Jesus relevant in today's world. It is so basic, so personal, so one on one. And if we want to be part of building up Christ's Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the Realm of Humanity, we begin by taking another look at the words and teachings of Jesus, and imitate Him.

You and I are always invited to pause for a few moments and realize how fortunate and privileged we are to have been invited to be part of this. In the 1800s the great Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper wrote, "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence, over which Christ, who is lord of all, does not cry "Mine!"

You and I affirm that this is absolutely true, yet at the same time we know we come up against a barrage of other voices demanding our loyalty. They also want our loyalty, our support, our time and our resources. We may have one foot in heaven, in God's kingdom, but the other one remains planted with all of the realities of human life. It is a challenging situation for us all.

Last Sunday, as part of the introduction to the first lesson we heard a quotation from Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychologist who survived the holocaust. Perhaps his most famous idea which came from his horrible experiences - others may hold my body captive, but I will never surrender my heart and mind - gives us some insight as to how we can truly live in God's Kingdom while facing the realities of life.

We place our faith and hope and trust in God, knowing His love for us, His protection and His care. And with that firmly in our heart and mind, we move forward.