

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today as we come to the end of our liturgical year, we mark it with the feast of Christ the King. This day was established to inspire and lead us all to seek the peace of Christ, and to trust the truth of that peace in Christ. Pope Pius XI first instituted this feast day in 1925. The encyclical that first instituted this feast day from Pope Pius XI was initially addressed to impact the leadership of the Catholic Church...as well as the laity. Interestingly, while this letter was written in 1925, I believe the sentiment and purpose remains very sound and applicable when looking at truth, power, and authority in the context of this Gospel lesson and in the context of our faith as it is put into action in our world and in our society today. Pius closes this encyclical describing the reign of Christ this way:

He (Christ) must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. Christ must reign in our hearts, which should...love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments...to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.¹

When we hear these words of Pope Pius and I must say when some hear certain passages in Holy Scripture such as we have before us today, we proudly puff-up and flex our faith and use it as an instrument of justice. The way this plays out is that we become enforcers and even “thugs” in the name of what we claim to be holy justice. As Christians, we authoritatively take on the task of policing the world or the culture out there in our self-appointed power that comes from a misunderstanding of the truth of God. But is this what we are being taught today in our Gospel? Are we truly following the laws and precepts of God when we become enforcers?

As I studied this Gospel text before us, I find that in the Gospel, the sacred power of truth stands face to face between two secular powers that are threatened and very afraid of the power that is truth. In other words, Jesus is standing in the face of Jewish authority and Roman authority. In this image in this chapter of John’s Gospel containing the trial narrative, the phrase, “Speaking truth to power” is personified by Jesus as that power of God’s truth is manifest in Jesus and stands before Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas. However, the mortal power does not recognize the transcendent truth that stands before them. In other words, the truth that is speaking to power is not being heard because the power of that truth is unlike power as Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas or even as we understand it to be.

At the start of this chapter in John, Jesus is arrested and brought before Annas first, then Caiaphas, and finally, Pilate. This along with the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, brings to light the issue of power and authority. From our perspective today, we tend to emphasize physical force as the expression of power and authority and absolute dominance as the character of authority. And this is the very sort of power and authority Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas assume to be true...and their assumptions still hold true today in our culture. And when we look at the truth of power and authority as it stands face to face with the secular power and authority of Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas, it sheds a light on the nature of our understandings of power. That truth that is Jesus Christ begins to deconstruct that power in favor of Christ’s power and authority that is not seen in the brutal force of a military revolt, a governmental takeover or insurrection. The truth of Christ’s

¹ <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11PRIMA.HTM> Papal Encyclicals Online, from the opening of the *Quas Primas*

power and authority is seen in grace and forgiveness that is lifted up and glorified on a cross that does not destroy Christ but sees Christ in the resurrection calling us all into that same glory through the ages until the end of time.²

As we stand in this world before all that persecutes us, all that threatens us, or all that attempts to destroy us, and what I mean by “us” I mean either the church and even our faith. As we stand in this world face to face with all that persecutes us, all that threatens us, or all that attempts to destroy us we want some tangible sense of authority or some sense of power to overthrow and destroy all that threatens our faith...this is where we become enforcers and even “thugs” in the name of what we claim to be holy justice through our legalistic sense of what we claim to be the truth of Jesus Christ...but is this the truth of Jesus Christ we belong to or is it our assumption of truth...or is it just plain-down bad theology that we so fiercely enforce and defend?

I think everyone in here today could probably say that truth is that which is true in accordance with fact or reality. However, there seems to be a troubling phenomenon occurring in our culture these days that says, if I didn't see it, I don't believe it...no matter how proven or how factual. Likewise, if *I feel* something is true or even untrue...no matter how disproven I am...or no matter how bad my theology is in *my* opinion, I am correct...this is my truth. Our opinions become our facts and we launch our self-appointed power from that opinion. Even as we pray as Christ taught us to pray, for the kingdom and the power and the glory are to be the Lord's, we still live as though it is our kingdom, my kingdom, our power and glory, my power and glory.

Looking then at this exchange between Jesus in the face of Jewish authority and Roman authority we see that these worldly powers are threatened and they want this threat known as Jesus destroyed. Of course they want Jesus destroyed, because that is what worldly power does when threatened, even though from the time of His birth, Jesus did nothing but healed sick, gave sight to the blind, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, raised the dead, gave dignity to the poor, loved his enemy, and taught his disciples and us to do the same...my goodness, he even turned water into really good wine...but in the eyes of earthly power, authority, and what they called truth, Jesus was a threat and needed to be destroyed.

And now in our bad theology and misunderstanding of God's truth revealed in Jesus Christ we too stand in this scene before us in this Gospel lesson as sacred power and truth face off with worldly power and authority and we too in our earthly or worldly understanding feel the need to destroy those who do not see things as we do. But Jesus does not do this, why then do we feel we have to? Jesus taught us when confronted with worldly authority, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,” (Matt 22:21). Luther also taught us in the Small Catechism concerning governing authority:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authority. For wherever the governing authority is, it is ordered by God. But whoever resists the governing authority, resists God's order...it is God's handmaid who executes punishment against those who do evil.³

² Kysar, Robert. *Preaching John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. Page 147. This paragraph is not a direct quote but uses some of Kysar's wording.

³ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. “The Small Catechism” under the heading, Concerning Governing Authority, page 365, par 4.

As Jesus stands before Jewish authority and Roman authority, he is showing us the truth and the sheer authority of God, he does not resist the governing authority that he stands before. Jesus shows no pride or outward trappings of power as we know it or understand it. When asked about his power, what the nature of his power is, or when it will appear, we see in Jesus that his strength needs nothing in this world...the truth of his power and his authority is not held in a human context nor is it destroyed or perishable by earthly force or authority. Even as the outcome of this confrontation sees Jesus on the cross, he is not destroyed or killed...he lives and continues to live, as all generations continue to call Him blessed. The Mighty One standing before Pilate continues to do great things for us, and holy is his name. His mercy continues to be for all who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and continues to lift up the lowly; he continues to fill the hungry with good things⁴...and continues to give dignity to the poor, and most of all...the Lord continues to love his enemy.

Just because we cannot know everything does not mean we know nothing. St. Paul reminded us that our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect and we live in twilight more than we do in clarity. However, do we then live in our imperfection and in our opinions about truth? When we do, we end or we close our minds to more conversations than we begin because the darkness of our truth that is our opinion views opposition as a threat rather than seeing a light that may grow and strengthen the real truth among us.⁵

The truth that is revealed to us today in a very humble Jesus...stands on trial for being a threat to the misunderstood authority of the world. Jesus does not threaten physical violence, even when Peter cut the ear of Malchus Jesus sternly shows us that violence is not part of his truth, his authority, or his power. In this trial Jesus does not gather an army or instigate an insurrection or war...nor does he usurp the authority he stands before. He doesn't because God does not need to violently overpower or destroy earthly power with more violence. What God will do as a result of this trial that ends with the death of Jesus, God will heal, will redeem all the world with grace and sheer love in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our trust in this truth about Jesus as Christ the King does not nor cannot become a truth that we mold and or tailor to fit our claims in order to be used as power and judgment over others. Our trust...our faith in this truth that is Jesus Christ is our relationship with Christ our King who by his reign in our hearts assures us of grace and mercy for our shortcomings, our sins, and our brokenness. But that same grace and mercy for our shortcomings, our sins, and our brokenness that Jesus gives to us is for others as well, who are not like us, and may not see or understand Jesus Christ as we do.

We are not God's militant governing force, we are forgiven sinners who live under the sheer grace of God in this world that has been redeemed through our faith in the truth that is Jesus Christ. We may desire a surge of fire to purge the evil. But instead, for the trusting Christian, we get a splash of water. We may desire powerful armies to destroy and right the wrong. But instead, for the trusting Christian, there is only a simple piece of bread. We may desire strong and powerful rulers

⁴ Luke 1:48-53, a take on the *Magnificat* is used here to describe the presence of our Lord in our life.

⁵ Meacham, Jon. *The Hope of Glory, Reflections on the Last Words of Jesus From the Cross*. New York: Convergent Books, 2020. The last few sentences and question reflect this author's words in the prologue of this book, pages 10-11.

in the name of God. But instead, for the trusting Christian, there is a simple sip of wine that claims us and assures us all of the truth that is Christ the King.⁶

¹ The Lord is king;

 he has put on splendid apparel;
 the Lord has put on his apparel
 and girded himself with strength.

² The Lord has made the whole world
 so sure that it cannot be moved;

⁶ The Lord's testimonies are very sure... (*Psalm 93:1-2, 6*)

...may holiness adorn our house, forever and forevermore.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

⁶ Kysar, Robert. *Preaching John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. Page 92, not a direct quote but I adapted an image Dr. Kysar used to close his Christ the King sermon that is on pages 148-151.