



Rev Chris Taylor – 11/25/18

Christ The King

A couple of weeks ago as part of our tour of Israel, our group visited the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu (which means “cock’s crow”). The church is built on the site of Caiaphas’ palace – the site where Jesus was first tried, the site where Peter denied him three times. After spending some time in a chapel, we followed our guide as he led us down a series of stairs into some subterranean rooms with low, arched ceilings. Then he led us through a door which took us down still more stairs into a pit that had been carved out of stone. That pit is where Jesus was kept – either thrown or lowered by a rope into this structure that was about fifteen feet deep and twenty feet wide.

There wouldn’t have been any lights, just the hard rock surfaces of the cave around him as he explored it by touch; isolated from the sounds of whatever was going on in the rooms above him. That’s where they kept Jesus while the religious leaders gathered above decided his fate.

Towards early morning, the door would have opened and the light of a torch would have appeared. Guards would have then escorted Jesus to the court of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. This is where the trial, described here in our gospel lesson, took place.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks. All four gospels agree that this was his first question. It lay at the heart of the Sanhedrin’s charge: that Jesus claimed to be King – a claim that amounted to treason before the Roman authorities.

Jesus never really answers the question, but he does say that he is, indeed, in a possession of a kingdom. Only his kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is the stuff of all eternity.

“For this I was born,” Jesus says, “for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” “Born” – here is the full humanity of Jesus, born of a woman, as fully and completely human as you or me. And “Came into the world” – came from where? Came from God and with God and of God – a part of the Godhead; part of all eternity; fully divine, yet choosing to empty himself that he might become as one of us. And to what end? Jesus is clear: the he might share the truth.

Do you want to know the great truths of our existence? Then look to Jesus. Look to who he was. Look at what he taught and what he revealed. God is real. All eternity is real. And the very essence of the infinite, mind-boggling force that cast the galaxies across the universe and brought all things into being is love. Love. That’s what God is about. That is what this life is all about.

Today, we look to science to reveal the great truths of our existence, but the best that science can do is describe the universe and the forces they are able to observe and measure. Science can't tell us why we are here. Science can't stand as moral arbiter between right and wrong. It is only theology, only faith, only Jesus who can reveal to us those truths that infuse our lives with meaning and with hope. And what do we find when we look towards him?

In her recent book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*ⁱ, author Doris Kearns Goodwin writes of the crisis that faced Theodore Roosevelt in the first year of his administration – just months after the assassination of William McKinley. In May of 1902, one hundred and forty seven thousand coal miners went on strike. Coal was the life-blood of the nation at that time; it is what drove the mills and factories, heated homes, and provided power for the railroads and the cities. As supplies dwindled and the cost of coal increased fifty and sixty percent, factories closed, workers were laid off, schools were forced to send children to unheated homes, and the first hints of anarchy began to be felt as bombs went off beneath railroad bridges, and mobs began commandeering coal cars as they moved through villages.

Believing the welfare of the nation was at stake, Roosevelt took the unprecedented step of getting involved. Never before had a president had a president intervened in a conflict between capital and labor, but Roosevelt understood that the landscape had changed. With the industrial revolution, great corporations had begun to take the place of smaller businesses. The old relation between employer and employee in which both were known to each other and they lived in the same community was disappearing. With that shift, all the bargaining power was moving to those on top.

Roosevelt didn't side with labor or with capital. He believed that both were essential; that both needed to succeed. What he saw, rather, was that there was now a third party involved; a third party whose needs had to be considered, as well. The very scale of the coal combine meant the welfare of the nation was now at stake. That's what drove him to get involved. That's what led him to risk impeachment to try and bring an end to the strike before winter set in.

Theodore Roosevelt didn't always get it right. He was one of my favorite presidents, but to my mind he was perhaps the worst ex-presidents of all time – betraying close friends and wreaking havoc in the politics of that era. But one thing he clearly got right: he never for one moment believed the presidency was all about himself; never for one moment believed he was there to serve some special interest. The great driver throughout his administration, rather, was the public welfare. He was driven by what he believed was best for the nation as a whole. That's what made him a great president. That's why his face is up there on Mount Rushmore beside Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.

This is what the country saw in his response to the great coal strike. They saw a man who put the country and its citizens first. They saw a president willing to risk everything to spare the nation the horrors of a winter without coal. It was his values and his priorities that were on display. It was his character that became clear to the nation that fall, and that's why, just two

years later, he swept to an easy victory in the election of 1904, taking every region of the country except the south.

If that's what we see when we look at Roosevelt and his presidency, what do we see when we take a similar look at Jesus' life and ministry? We see a leader who put others first. We see the Son of God who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for all humanity. Everything he did, everything he taught, the way he lived, the way he died – it all came down to one thing. He came to share the truth. God is real. Eternity is real. And the greatest power in all creation isn't hate, and it is not coercive and it is not oppressive. No, the greatest power is love itself.

Isn't that the kind of leader for whom our hearts long? We all serve something. We serve whatever it is that we long for, whatever it is we think is going to bring us happiness or fulfillment. It might be status or money, success or pleasure. It can be our business, or it can be our family. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. Each can be a blessing. But none of them can sustain the weight of all our hopes and expectations. There is only One who can reveal the deepest truths of our existence, only one who can fulfill our greatest longings.

This morning we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of our liturgical calendar. Next week, with the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a whole new year. And what better way to end the year than to look towards that day when Jesus will come again, defeating all that stands in opposition, and be lifted up as King – unchallenged Lord of all that is.

This is the good news: in the end, God wins. In the end, evil and darkness and death itself will be defeated once and for all, and for all of time. God wins. Love wins. Light and justice and truth and all that is good will claim the final victory.

That's where history is heading. That's what God has in store. And Jesus came proclaiming that with his presence this coming Kingdom was already breaking into this world. It is not of this world, but it is here, all around us. And through Jesus, you and I can catch a glimpse of it. Through him, we can begin to taste that kingdom even here.

All it takes is the choice to follow him; to serve him and to serve his purposes above all others. Do you think there is some better way out there? Then go for it. Give it a try. But as for me, when I look back over the span of history, there is only One who reveals what is really true; only One who offers life in all its richness and all its abundance. And that's why I've chosen to follow Jesus.

ⁱ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 2018), pp. 243-272