WHO NEEDS A KING?

Scripture: John 18:33-37

FOCUS: With Christ as king we are called to live grateful lives guided by love in all things.

One of the things I appreciate about being a part of a mainline denomination is our liturgical nature. Liturgy is just a fancy word for tradition and structure. Like the Episcopalians, some Presbyterians, most Lutherans, the Catholics and others we observe the flow of the ancient church year. Today we bring the 2014/2015 year to a close. Next Sunday we begin again as we enter the Advent season, a time which calls us to prepare our hearts and our lives for the coming of Jesus. But more about that over the next few weeks.

This church year thing is a little like a Bill Murray movie from several years ago. Many of you will remember Groundhog Day, the story of a reporter who somehow got stuck in a time loop and repeated living a single Groundhog Day over and over. Eventually the routine takes a toll on the poor guy. Try as he may, he can’t even commit suicide in order to end the ordeal. Then something happens. He gradually comes to deal with the situation and to do what he can to make life better for those he encounters along the way. After all, he knows what is coming for folks so he tries to help people avoid some of them. There is much more to the plot, but I was simply struck this week by the fact that as we follow the church year we are a bit like Phil, Murray’s character in the movie.

I really don’t remember when we first began our Men’s Wednesday Bible Study. I do know that we have been through the three year cycle of Lectionary texts several times now. If you are really observant you may have noticed that every three years the texts printed in the bulletin are exactly the same. If you go back and look at the texts for the first Sunday in Advent in 2012, you will discover that they were exactly the same as those listed in your bulletin this morning for next week. From time to time one of us well remark on Wednesday, ***“Didn’t we just have this text?”,*** only to realize, it was three years ago.

You may well have read about the various studies which have sought to determine how long it takes for an activity to become a habit. I have read several articles which say repeating daily for about 25 days does the trick. However, recent studies have concluded that it is more like 66 days. I am certain that there are various factors which influence the matter, but the underlying truth is the same. We are a species which doesn’t change very quickly, and we need to repeat activities if they are to become second nature. I would argue that it may be even more difficult to break bad habits once they are established.

That is one of the reasons that I find the liturgical year to be so beneficial. The repetition helps us establish a habitual routine focused around remembering and pondering the amazing truths of God’s action throughout history. It calls us to remember and to ponder the grace of God as revealed through the life of Jesus. And the church year also helps me with that other side of the coin. I confess that I often come to the Advent or Lenten seasons needing to not only work on establishing new habits, but also to work on breaking some bad ones, often the same ones I had to break last year. Be honest, I bet you have had the same experience.

Because we tend to lose focus, we need to be reminded regularly what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ. The liturgical calendar helps us do that as we return year after year to Bethlehem, as we walk throughout Judean, trek with the disciples to Jerusalem and finally kneel at the foot of the cross. A bit later we are called to feel the wind and the flames of Pentecost as we consider the coming of the Holy Spirit. We then travel through what seems to be an unending string of so called “ordinary days”. There is a reason that so much of the year is represented by the green of ordinary time. Isn’t it true that for all of us, most of life is pretty ordinary? And that is not a bad thing. Ordinary doesn’t have to mean bland or unexciting, rather it means usual or commonly encountered. It is a good thing to have the days of ordinary time as we seek to make our faith a part, not just of the high or low moments in our lives, but of all the plateaus which fill the majority of our days.

Today ordinary time comes to an end. Our paraments are white as we celebrate the reign of our monarch, Jesus who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the pinnacle of the church year, the culmination of all that we have witnessed since we last entered Advent. The various so called “Feast Days” which are sprinkled throughout the year are of mostly ancient origin. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost are all events from the first century and they have been observed for thousands of years. A couple of weeks ago we observed All Saints Day. While a bit more contemporary it still is an observance with a long history, first given prominence in the fifth century.

What we observe today is a little different, having been officially sanctioned a mere 93 years ago by Pope Pius XI. It actually was born of a rather dubious scheme. Pius was negotiating a treaty with Mussolini designed to protect the political status and independence of the Vatican. While you might assume that the genesis of this great day was well intentioned, designed to affirm the absolute sovereignty of Christ, it was in fact part of a deal designed to support a political agenda. Both Hitler and Mussolini agreed to grant the church protection and favors in exchange for political silence. Ironically what we have is a feast which was born of a mutually expedient political pact between the church and Fascist dictators.

Talking king stuff is a little confusing for those of us who have lived our whole lives in the United States. While some joke that families like the Kennedys, the Bushes and the Clintons are our royalty we have no royal family, no monarchs. Still many of us are fascinated by the Windsors, the imperial family of our mother country. Every time there is a royal baby bump we hear about it for months on end. There are even odds established with bookies so that folks can place wagers on the name to be given to the unborn heir. Royal weddings are covered worldwide and the every move of the queen and all her family is observed by anxious paparazzi. We are intrigued by the opulence of the lifestyle of these unimaginably privileged folk. To put it in perspective, this June it was announced that Buckingham Palace, where the queen resides, is in need of a bit of sprucing up. Jim Spears, you might be interested, the estimated cost is $237 million.

Of course the ironic thing about all of this is the fact that the Windsors actually have relatively little political power. The day to day operations of the government are not really in their control. While the queen is officially the head of state, the Prime Minister is the official head of the government. That is sort of what Pope Pious was trying to accommodate when he sanctioned the feast we honor today. He was wanting to recognize Christ as head of state, but really wanted that to be a more or less ceremonial role. When it came to actually governing he and those with whom he made the pact were to be in control.

So, because of a rather dubious alliance between a pope and a couple of the most devilish folk to ever walk the planet we come today to honor Christ the King. So how do we do that? The first thing we must do is figure out what exactly the term means for us. So when did Jesus refer to himself as king? He never did, and that is significant. The closest he comes is in the scene we have before us this morning. Pilate says, ***“So you are a king?”***  And Jesus replies, ***“You say that I am a king.”*** The only other reference to Jesus being King comes in the story we will be pondering over the next few weeks as we prepare for the fresh coming of Christ. Remember that the Wise Men came to Bethlehem seeking the one who was born King of the Jews. So at the very beginning and now at the end of Jesus’ life we find the theme.

Under Pilate’s interrogation Jesus does say, ***“My kingdom is not from this world.”*** I suppose you could argue that here Jesus is claiming to be a king, but the important message is that what he is about has no similarity to the rule of folks like Caesar, Hitler, Mussolini or even King David of ancient times or today’s Queen Elizabeth. Having been put on the spot by Pilate, Jesus does that deflection thing we talked about last week. Instead of answering the question he speaks a word of deep significance. ***“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.”***

Then Pilate asks rhetorically, ***“What is truth?”*** I have always taken that to be a word of wise pondering on Pilate’s part. But this week I came upon a different point of view which, given what Pilate does next makes a lot of sense. We read, ***“Then he went back out to the Jews and told them, “I find nothing wrong in this man. It’s your custom that I pardon one prisoner at Passover. Do you want me to pardon the ‘King of the Jews’? They shouted back, “Not this one, but Barabbas!”*** Have you ever considered that rather than a pondering statement, Pilate’s words might well have been a sarcastic dismissal? Perhaps the inflection was more like, ***“Truth, what is truth anyway and who really cares, I just don’t want any trouble.”***

But you see a King Jesus is about trouble, actually he is about a lot of trouble. Trouble for those who want to take advantage of others, trouble for those who are driven by self-righteousness and pride. Trouble for those who think they are in control of their destiny. Trouble for those who are ungrateful. The only one ever to fully reveal the truth was right before Pilate, but he didn’t really want to hear it.

Never claiming kingship Jesus does say, ***“For this I ws born, for this I came to earth, to witness to the truth.”*** So how do we honor this king who never had a permanent home as an adult, who spent his brief career seeking, with mixed success, to lead people to God’s truth, who would refuse to deny that truth and face the brutality of the cross as a result? We honor him by listening to his voice of truth and so living that his words come alive to those who encounter us as we live through mostly ordinary time. And what do we hear him say? It is all wrapped up in a single word. We hear it put in different ways. Feed the hungry, give generously, pray for your enemies. He spells it out in the beatitudes where defines those who are blessed. They are, the humble, the compassionate, the righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. So what is the word? Jesus say, ***“Just love, that is all and that is a lot.”***

I ran across a quote from some guy named Jim Wern this week. I couldn’t quite figure out who he is or from what perspective he writes but I love what he said, ***“I like messy people who don’t fit in a box or stay between the lines, but whose integrity is greater than any rule book and whose loyalty is stronger than blood.”*** Integrity. What an underused word and even more underused attribute. Jesus never used the word, but he spoke it with every action of love and grace and so are we called to do. So how do we live as those who honor Christ as King? We live lives of integrity governed by unrestrained love. And how do we honor our king? We do so by living lives marked by gratitude and grace. On Thursday many of us will gather with family and friends to share a special meal. And that is a good thing, but we must not forget the call to simple gratitude. So whether you eat alone or with a fully extended table full of others, whether everything in your life is wonderful or you are struggling, as we all do on occasion, find time to give thanks to your humble King of Kings.

Victor Frankl wrote. ***“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”***

I close with a story from one of the Catholic sources I use for occasional inspiration. The contributor writes of a particularly frustrating morning and of what God revealed to him in its midst. ***It’s so easy to be annoyed by the little things. How hard can it be, then, to allow ourselves to be thankful for the little things? This morning, I was on the verge of being completely annoyed by the traffic that made me miss my usual train. Instead, realizing that I was now “early” for the next train, I strolled at a leisurely pace from my parking spot to the train station. I took the time to appreciate the blue skies, the budding trees, the chirping birds, and the cool but warming breeze of spring. Paying attention to and being thankful for these “little” things effectively boxed out the annoyance of missing my usual train that wanted so desperately to win me over and to influence my day.***

***Gratitude is not fluff. It is serious medicine—an effective antidote to the poisons of annoyance, exasperation, and cynicism that vie for our attention. The positive little things that we can be thankful for each day are no less real than the negative little things that annoy us. They simply don’t clamor as loudly as the negative things do. We need to develop a capability for recognizing the subtle little things for which we are grateful and allow them to use their inherent power to overwhelm the negative. Take a moment to look around (and within) you: what little things are you grateful for at this very moment?”***

Annoyance, exasperation and cynicism, sounds like the headline of an article on the political climate in our nation today. But we are citizens of a kingdom ruled by a decidedly nonpolitical king who simply calls his subjects to live life thankfully, graciously and lovingly. That’s all, and that’s a lot. And that’s the truth. For your sake, for the sake of all the love starved souls out there and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who is love, may we all answer the call. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.