

“Trying Times”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 21, 2021 – Reign of Christ Sunday
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; John 18:33-37

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloane Coffin).

In today’s gospel lesson from John, we read of a conversation between two rulers, Jesus the Messiah and Pontius Pilate. One of these rulers, Pilate, was governor of the Roman province of Judaea for about a decade, and was the most powerful person in the land at the time of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. During his time as governor, he oversaw many executions, often without trials, and was despised by the people for his brutality. Always fearful of losing control over the people and losing his position of power, he went to great lengths to keep the people calm, silencing public complaints and violently suppressing even hints of uprisings. His use of violence in maintaining control, especially his excessive use of capital punishment, eventually got him pulled from his position as governor by Rome.

Jesus, the other character in today’s lesson, was also a ruler, but couldn’t have been more different than the kind of ruler that fearful, brutal Pilate was. Unlike Pilate, his reign was not political, and he did not claim to be a challenger to the authority and power of Rome, although this was the charge brought against him by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Jesus was not a worldly king and had no army supporting him. Rather, he reigned over a realm that was not of this world, a realm of truth.

During the course of the conversation of these two people, one whose power was not of this world, and the other whose power over others in that part of the world was supreme, two trials emerged. As Jesus was examined by Pilate, who determined Jesus was no threat to his rule, but who later had him executed anyway to placate the Jewish leadership, Pilate was also faced something of a trial: He was standing face not with the King of the Jews, but the Lord of All Truth, but in asking Jesus, “What is truth?” it was clear that he failed to see that Truth

that was staring him in the face. In this trial, Pilate failed to see any power but worldly power.

In our own trying times on this Reign of Christ Sunday, as we examine this story of Jesus and Pilate, we should also examine ourselves and ask what it means for us to be followers of the one whose realm is heavenly and not of this world. As followers of Jesus and citizens of a heavenly realm, are we do be disengaged from the world and its politics? I believe that submitting ourselves to the one who reigns in truth means that we let God's truth reign in our hearts and minds and deeds. We seek for the thoughts of God, known to us in the thoughts of Christ, to become our thoughts. We desire for the ways of God as revealed to us in Christ's ways to become our ways. And when Christ so reigns in our lives, our whole earthly being is impacted, including the ways we interact with others in this world. Our understanding of the events of the world should be shaped by our identity as followers of Christ, and all our actions in the world, including our politics, should be guided by this core aspect of our being. We are always to carry God's message of truth into the world, so that the realm of truth would expand in the hearts and minds and deeds of people as that by the truth of Christ people would be set free.

Here in the worldly realm where we live, we sorely in need of hearing this message of liberating good news, for there is so much enslaving bad news that needs to be displaced by it. Much of this bad news is produced by the many fear-filled, violent Pilates in our world and all those who support their ways. And the Pilates of this world are very active, working to grow their power and influence day by day by day. They certainly will if angels of God's truth remain silent and do nothing.

Dear friends, let us not be silent or do nothing. We are followers of the one who embodied God's truth by love, and he taught us how to speak and showed us how to act in love. So let us speak in love and let us act in love.

So when the world asks, "What is truth?" Let us proclaim loudly and proudly that love is the truth. When the world valorizes and glorifies fools who act violently and cause destruction, let us show our children a better, truly glorious way of selfless love for our neighbors. When the world calls for the hungry to go unfed

and the powerless to remain diminished, let us enact justice by using our great resources to build up bodies, minds, and spirits.

This, active, selfless love, is ultimate truth. This sets people free. This sets you free. May God's realm of love grow among us this day, and through us, may the reign of Christ grow in our world. Amen.