

*"A True and Objective Point of Reference"*

*Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37*

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Another national election has passed and, in some places, votes are still being counted for the Senate and House of Representatives. Noteworthy is the Pennsylvania Senate race between Bob Casey and Dave McCormick. An automatic recount was triggered by Pennsylvania state election law. A difference of 0.5% or less triggers a recount: the difference between Casey and McCormick is 0.2% , just under 17,500 votes (17,457) out of 6.75 MILLION cast (6,774,357). It is a reminder that in every election, every vote counts.

What has this to do with this Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year, called "The Reign of Christ" or, more traditionally, "Christ the King Sunday?" Well, I have an announcement:

*"Jesus is King – no recount required!"*

This claim of Christ's sovereignty makes Christians unique. We declare as truth that the Risen Christ is now seated at God's right hand to rule over the world.

The problem is that it raises the Roman governor Pilate's question: "*What is truth?*" It reverberates down two millennia, as fresh today as it was then. What is truth?

Traditional Christian teaching is founded on claims to truth, claims trumpeted repeatedly in John's Gospel:

*"the Word became flesh...full of grace and truth" (1:14)*

*"...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (8:32)*

*"I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6)*

*"for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (18:37)*

One must be either mad, or speaking the truth, to say as Jesus did, "*I and the Father are one.*" (10:30)

Yet this very idea of universal or absolute truth remains hotly debated. Some argue that to assert any truth either breeds intolerance or simply misses the delightful variety of other, equally valid, truths. We say things like *“Believe what you want as long as you are sincere”* or *“All religions are about the same anyway”* or *“It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you act on your convictions.”*

I am sure that the extremists who hijacked the religion of Islam on 9/11/01 were sincere and acting on their convictions. I am sure that the Nazis who murdered 6 million Jews and 6 million others were sincere. I am sure that the writers of Project 2025, with its draconian proposals against women and immigrants, are sincere. So truth in general, and Christian truth in particular, is a matter of life and death. We need a true and objective point of reference by which to be guided.

When African-Americans escaped slavery in antebellum America by leaving the southern states and heading north, they had a true and objective point of reference. Traveling at night, the saying among the formerly enslaved was *“follow the drinking gourd,”* the “Big Dipper” and its companion, the North Star, to freedom in the north. They never had to worry if it would be there. It was.

This week America’s air travel reaches record levels. We are reminded of the urgency of a true and objective point of reference for pilots. Flying in the clouds or at night, they must trust the one true and objective point of reference: the artificial horizon. Originally developed as the gyroscopic turn coordinator, the artificial horizon compensates for a pilot’s inability to feel changes in an airplane’s altitude. An aircraft cannot be kept level without a visual reference point—either the true horizon of the earth or an instrument that indicates the true horizon. That is what the artificial horizon does. If the plane cannot be kept level, it will spiral into the ground. Those of us old enough to remember the tragic death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette and his sister-in-law Lauren Bessette 25 years ago will recall that “spatial disorientation” was the reason given for the plane’s crash into the Atlantic Ocean. A pilot never has to worry if the artificial horizon is in use.

So the scandalous claim of Christianity is that Jesus is the true and objective point of reference for our lives. He is the “drinking gourd,” the “gyroscopic turn indicator,” the one who was despised and rejected and is now, as we say in the Creed, *“ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.”*

In Revelation the author, St. John of Patmos, shows us what is true by revealing the throne and the One who sits on it. Jesus told Pilate that *“my kingdom is not of this world,”* yet the vision of the next world guides our vision for this one. Maybe that’s where we lose our way, forgetting that the people of God are supposed to be about creating, as well as praying for, *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* Maybe too much of our vision for God’s kingdom looks more like the Pennsylvania senate election than it looks like the cross of Christ.

There are no easy answers for governor Pilate’s challenge to Jesus’ claim of truth, especially for those who say, as someone recently did to me, *“I don’t believe in church.”* The scriptures invite reflection, a behavior not particularly encouraged in our culture, our relationships, our politics or our governance. We say we want peace and rush around like madmen and madwomen. We say we want love but turn aside when love becomes difficult. We say we want hope but look skeptically at everything.

We don’t know if Pilate’s question, *“What is truth?”*, is mockery or sincere inquiry. What we do know is that the claim for Christ’s uniqueness is not found in forced acquiescence to our way of believing. It is not found in the Crusades of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when tens of thousands of Muslims were forced to convert and others killed for not professing Christ as Lord. It is not found in the excesses of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, when Protestants and Roman Catholics took turns murdering each other. Forced faith is no faith. An aged friend of German heritage used to say to me – much more poetically in German than in English – *“The one convinced against their will, holds the same opinion still.”*

The claim for Christ’s uniqueness, then, is found in the voice of Christ himself, the Good Shepherd, who says *“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”* (John 18:37) And what does that voice say? It does not say, “Kill people.” It does not say, “Exclude people.” It does not say,

“Demonize those who disagree with you, and call them names, denigrate their God-given personhood and put the lipstick of truth on the pig of lies woven for the unsuspecting.” The voice of Christ says *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* and “give” and “serve” and “sacrifice” and “be grateful.”

It’s one of the reasons there is an “Attitude of Gratitude” form in today’s bulletin. Over the last month you have heard testimonies from members of our Stewardship Committee and two sermons from me on making a financial commitment to Christ’s ministry through the church for our ministry in 2025. Today is the day when we receive your intentions. But whether or not one is prepared to make a pledge, we can all express gratitude. So all of us, regardless of our means, can give to God today. Please take a moment now to complete that form and have it ready when the ushers come.

Jesus consistently calls us to live as he lived: loving without judgment, caring beyond measure, putting service above self. He did it so very well that the world, which often detests such generosity, rose up and killed him. But it cost Jesus his life only for a season. Jesus knew that the God who created us all, and who eventually calls us home again, is the God who sent him and who would never leave him. This is truth, this God who is ever faithful, a true and objective point of reference that leads us to freedom and keeps us flying, so that we might be stewards of the kingdom of God on earth.

Today, this day, let us resolve anew to give thanks, to give love, to give our service to God. Amen.