

Christ the King, Bolte Baptism. November 25, 2018. John 18:33-37.

I confess that I love the days that get kind of complicated. Today we are celebrating Christ the King, a relatively new and obscure feast that sometimes feels a bit like something we do because we feel we should do something here on the threshold between what we call Ordinary Time and the beginning of Advent. And we are also baptizing Lillian Rachel Bolte into the household of God at 10:30 today—and a baptism is always the most important thing we do. Our bishop is fond of pointing out that baptism doesn't make God love us—it is something we do because of what we believe is already true. We baptize babies to make visible for us the unshakably truest thing about Lillian's life: that God loves her and will always love her.

We baptize Christians, not Episcopalians. Lillian this morning joins the one holy catholic apostolic church of God, just as we did as infants or children or adolescents or adults. We will join Lillian by renewing our baptismal promises in a few minutes. But the one big holy capital C Church only exists in real, particular communities, full of struggling disciples like us with bills to pay and bosses to please and loved ones to worry about. So while we are baptizing her into the same church of Paul and Peter and Mary Magdalene and Francis and Dr. King, we're the saints she'll know first. We're the holy conflicted grieving loving saints who will teach her what it means to accept God's love and emulate those paragons of divine love who have gone before. So in a way a baptism is also a commissioning service for the community around the candidate. We will do our blessed best to train her up to be a weirdo.

I know we may not think of ourselves as weirdos. It's not usually a compliment. But the extent to which we bristle at being called weirdos may be the extent to which we do not really grasp what a bizarre community the church is. It is today bizarre to shape a shared life around love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faith, and modesty. It is bizarre to build a community on forgiveness. The Sunday of Christ the King is meant to remind us of our weirdness.

This feast was only instituted in 1925. Pope Pius XI was looking out over the ruins of Europe after the Great War. Mostly Christians has just systematically destroyed a generation of mostly Christians in the name of competing nationalisms. A tyrannical communism was on the rise in Eastern Europe, and a tyrannical fascism was stirring in Southern and Central Europe. The idea behind the Feast is explicitly to call Christians out of the political idolatries to which our cultures are prone. The point of the Feast is to remind Christians that whatever political idolatries sweep up our nations, Christians strive to model our whole lives—including our political lives—on Jesus. This will always put us out of step with most of our neighbors. While our countries go mad with self-destructive delusions of supremacy, Christ the King Sunday reminds us to be holy weirdos.

In our gospel reading today, Pilate is what we might call normal. He doesn't look like an overtly evil man. He doesn't want to kill Jesus. But he's got Caesar pushing on one side and the religious and civic leaders of the people he's supposed to rule pulling on the other. You can almost hear him saying "Come on man, I'd like to help you, but you've got to give me something to work with." He cannot understand a man who will neither fight nor lie in the greatest extremity. He cannot understand a man who would rather tell the truth than survive.

This interrogation isn't characterized by outright hostility. This encounter between Jesus and the powers of the world is characterized by complete incomprehension. Pilate just can't make sense out of anything Jesus says or is, finally typified by his baffled question: what is truth? The answer of course is Jesus himself, the man who stands before him and says nothing in response. It is not an accident that the gospel reading for Christ the King Sunday is Jesus on trial, Jesus refusing to sanction violence to secure his own safety, Jesus finally giving everything rather than betray God and us. This is a very different kind of kingship, that calls for very different kinds of citizens. When we live as if Jesus is the truth, we too will be met with baffled incomprehension by the powers of the world.

Christ the King Sunday tells us that this is what we're here for. And having a baptism today reminds us that this is the kind of community into which we are welcoming Lillian. The church is called to be a community that prefers love over survival, forgiveness over status, and truth over control. It's a weird community. And we are the saints who will show Lillian how beautiful this life can be. Amen.