Sermon – Christ the King

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If I’m honest, I really didn’t want the lessons for today. I wanted something a little more, shall we say, personal and comfortable. But that’s a fault of mine. I want a Jesus that makes me feel good, really good. You know, my “own, personal Jesus” a la the Gospel according to Depeche Mode! (Your own, personal Jesus….remember those lyrics?) That’s because faced with reality, sometimes I want to escape, to get away from it all, and retreat into a safe place where everything “will just be all right.” But such is not Jesus.

Every time I snuggle up to Jesus thinking that he’ll make “life good today,” I get a stark reminder that Jesus is not about escaping life but facing it. Staring it down. Moving into it more fully so that resurrection can come amidst what is dying and what has died. Because unlike other kings that want “glory, glory hallelujah,” Jesus is about a different royalty, a different kingdom, a different world. He doesn’t want glory; he gives glory.

If we are all honest, we’ve all wanted a different Jesus over the past week. With destruction in Paris, Baghdad, Beirut, Mali, and even threatened here in Atlanta; with college campuses broken over patterns of discrimination; with earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes; with politics that seem infantile at best; with debates about starving women and children filling our airways, and arguments over borders and boundaries tossed about as if they were simple questions with simple answers, we want a big and powerful Jesus. One that sweeps down and takes charge. That demands mature and thoughtful action. That brings reasonable discernment. That tells his subjects what they must do or face the consequences.

And yet, we get the same old Jesus. The one who will touch the untouchable, dine with the unclean, rescue the oppressed, challenge the establishment, befriend the religious and the not-so religious, and face scheming, trickery, and entrapment orchestrated to neutralize him, to trap him in legalese and charge him with treason. The one who will be abandoned by his followers, and crucified between two bandits before being buried in a borrowed tomb.

We want a different Jesus because in the end we don’t want to fear this mess. We don’t want to be left behind wondering if resurrection will really come this time around; we don’t want a crucified king because believing in something new and unseen can just be too hard when the world is falling apart.

Things hoped for and yet unseen, believing that God is still at work among us. “Give me Jesus,” as the old spiritual claims, but please, just this once, give me a different Jesus.

And then, I remember. I remember that “God was one of us,” that he lived among oppression, that he sought to redeem this life, and knowing that makes all the difference. It’s not easy to let Jesus be one of us: to know that he hurts with us, cries with us, prays with us.

And yet right now it is that very proclamation that gives us hope. Because we want to know that Jesus was in that theatre in Paris. We want to know that Jesus was on the street in Beirut. We believe that Jesus was there in Baghdad and in all the places that violence tries to overrule peace.

Jesus as one of us in a boat fleeing Damascus is about as much resurrection as any of us could ever hope to see. Jesus as a mother in Belgium saying I will not fear, I will not retreat,

I will not go into hiding is to witness the stone being rolled away. Jesus that stands against oppression, that stands for the widowed and orphaned, that does not seek a sound bite answer when only skin in the game will bring hope. Jesus as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, is about seeing this world as a threshold of hope to reality of the next.

For in Christ both worlds collide, and as his Easter people, standing on the sidelines, enjoying the threshold curled up in a rocking chair with Jesus is not permissible. Standing idly by, wringing our hands, does not bridge worlds, it separates them.

In Jesus heaven kisses earth and earth kisses heaven not so we can sit around clapping as if the Jesus project is done and finished; no in Jesus heaven kisses earth and earth kisses heaven so we can get to building the kingdom together. For the heavenly kingdom comes, God’s will is done when we stop hoping for Jesus defined on our terms and start living for Jesus defined on God’s terms.

When I was writing this homily, I struggled, and posting that struggle to social media, I received many comments. But the one that meant the most to me came from an attorney with whom I used to practice law. He encouraged me, just as he did when I was preparing for oral arguments, not to hide behind the easy answers. As he put it in his message to me, and considering the time of year, he said: “don’t duck behind turkeys or swaddling clothes.”

Knowing his voice, and more so, knowing his life, the things that he has faced head on, the challenges he has met, the way he has loved with wild abandon despite the hardships of life,

I also knew that he was telling me: Michael, let go and let God.

You see, when we don’t let go and let God, Jesus, as Jesus really is, doesn’t have much of chance. When we don’t let go and let God, we want a different Jesus. One that just takes us away. That rescues us from danger. That sweeps us off our feet.

And in the end, such a desire is the most dangerous desire of all: for in wanting Jesus to be someone else, in wanting to stand by on the threshold between earth and heaven, Jesus will turn out just one way: he will only look like the person in the mirror, entrapped by the world and heading toward death.

If Jesus looks like our mirror, he is not Christ the King. He’s just a worldly idol created for our own little therapeutic purposes in our own little world where God is just a Christian, and “everything [will] just be all right.”

Yes, if I’m honest, I really didn’t want the lessons for today.

Instead, I got Jesus.

The real Jesus wandering the streets of Europe, stranded outside Damascus, starving on a boat in the Mediterranean, picking up her life among debris and despair on the dark streets of life.

But oh, how he needs me to call him as he is. For if we stop shouting “Crucify him,” and start saying in Paris and Damascus, in Beruit and Mali, in Beligum and in all places of despair and destruction, “He is risen. She is risen”, heaven and earth will indeed kiss one another, “love will not be a victory march,” and the “cold and broken Alleluia” will come from our lips.

And indeed, Christ will be our King.