

“Pastor to the Pilgrims”

John 18:33-37

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This morning we celebrate the last Sunday of the church year. Next week the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new church year as we anticipate the birth of Jesus. But this week is the last Sunday which is known liturgically as Christ the King Sunday. Today we speak of Christ's reign and celebrate the fullness of God's kingdom as revealed by Jesus.

Our gospel passage reflects the church's designation that on the last Sunday of the year Christ's reign is proclaimed. In John's gospel, we read the account of Jesus' interview with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate is concerned with one thing, whether or not Jesus is saying he is a rival king to Caesar, so he asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

The question for Jesus knowing full well why Pilate is asking it, offers an opportunity not to defend himself, but to push for new understandings and to challenge the Roman authority. Putting aside Pilate's concern, Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world, or over people, which is Caesar's quest.

Then Jesus also says: “I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” With great indifference Pilate responds rhetorically: “What is truth?” And not waiting for an answer Pilate dismisses Jesus.

To testify to the truth, this is Jesus' self-identified purpose to bring the ways of the world and people into the light. To risk exposing human desires good and bad. To say what is and what isn't consistent with God's ways. Which is more powerful, calling oneself a king or speaking the truth in love? Jesus made it known that his ministry had to do with the truth, not gaining power over people. I believe this same desire was present among our Congregational ancestors who sailed to North America in the early 1600's.

John Winthrop, who you may or may not remember as one of the first governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, said that the pilgrims were to be a beckon, “a city upon a hill,” that others would recognize as people who lived according to God's ways. Some have mistakenly thought that Winthrop was making a statement of superiority regarding the position of the pilgrims, but such an interpretation would be anathema to Winthrop's humble piety. Winthrop believed the pilgrims were to testify to the truth as seen in their way of life, how they treated each other, the freedom they afforded each other.

While today is celebrated as the Reign of Christ Sunday throughout Christianity, in this church we also celebrate today as Heritage Sunday. Each year on the Sunday before our

national Thanksgiving Day Holiday, we celebrate our Congregational heritage. The Puritan and separatist pilgrims who sailed to North America in the early 1600's are the founders of our Congregational Christian heritage and we honor them and their attempts to be "a city upon a hill" and their efforts to testify to the truth.

While I am aware that the pilgrims had plenty of human imperfections, I do believe that their deepest impulse was to create societies and social structures that could offer religious freedom and spiritual accountability. They wanted to throw off the hierarchies that denied people the freedoms to worship as they chose and the opportunities to live according to their own beliefs.

John Robinson is known as the pastor to the Pilgrims. His life ministry and journey gave form and shape to our Congregational and national way of life.

Robinson was born in 1575, just as the Protestant Reformation was coming into its own throughout Europe and Great Britain. In his late teens Robinson studied for the priesthood of the Church of England which had split from the Roman Catholic Church its practices had not changed much from its Roman heritage.

Early in his years as a priest Robinson taught at the Cambridge, England Seminary. During his years there he became more and more critical of the Church of England. He opposed the hierarchy and authority of church leaders, he contested the mandated forms of worship of the church, and he was critical of church beliefs and practices that were similar to the Roman Church which other Reformers were addressing throughout Europe.

In 1604 Robinson resigned his teaching position, married Bridget White and became the pastor at St. Andrew's Church in Norwich.

At St. Andrew's, Robinson's separatist leanings grew. He had little confidence that the Church of England would ever change, in fact King James I was moving the church toward greater conformity. He enforced what was known as the Act Against Puritans which forbade non-Church of England Puritans from holding their own worship services. It was not long before Robinson realized that his tenure at St. Andrew's was not to continue, and he began to seek a congregation that shared his separatist leaning that was more remote from church and government monitoring.

In 1606 the Robinson's moved to the northern England town of Scrooby where he became the assistant pastor at a congregation of approximately 100 members.

The congregation gathered at the manor of William Brewster whose name you heard in the reading about the five kernels of corn. Other members of the congregation were John and William Bradford, William eventually became Governor Bradford of Plymouth Colony.

In Scrooby Robinson found fertile ground for his separatist beliefs. The worship space the congregation used was simple and without distractions – no pictures, statues or ornate stained glass. In Scrooby the congregation created their own forms of worship that spoke to their spirit. In Scrooby Robinson and other members of the congregation began to formulate the principles on which a church was to be founded, these same principles would find their way into the early agreements of the congregations in New England and into the foundation documents of our country. These principles included:

- 1) The centrality of covenant theology based on God’s covenant or promise of unearned grace. Covenants are voluntary pledges, given and received in freedom, they are gifts to a relationship offering that which lifts people up to greater love and service.
- 2) Congregational polity, which had to do with who makes decisions regarding leadership in the community of faith. The church of Scrooby began the practice of local congregations democratically electing their own clergy and leaders. They made it clear that Bishops would not appoint ministers, ministry was discerned by the congregation.
- 3) This church believed that authority rested in the gathered community of believers. Instead of some distant leaders telling a local congregation how they were to worship and conduct their life together, the members of a particular church were to decide for themselves matters of ministry and worship.
- 4) Membership in a church was not to be based on citizenship or parishes. In the Congregational Church membership would be based on a public confession of faith.
- 5) While there would be local autonomy for congregations there would also be accountability with neighboring churches. Congregations could gather with each other for mutual support, worship, education and as a way admonishing each other to live faithfully according to Christ’s teachings.

As these principles became more central to the life of the Scrooby congregation it became clear that the Church of England would not tolerate these practices. Within a few years the entire congregation decided to flee to Holland where religious freedom was tolerate. It was William Bradford who spoke as the church made arrangements to leave England, he said: “we are to become pilgrims and stranger on the earth,” which was how these people of faith became known as “pilgrims”.

In Leyden, Holland the congregation grew to as many as 700 members. Rev. Robinson became their senior pastor and teacher. An educated community of faithful members was central to Robinson’s ministry, he himself continuing to study and write.

By 1619 Elder Brewster and other church leaders began to set their sights on the new world that they might grow further in their journey to live as God's people. Rev. Robinson supported this desire and committed himself to this calling. As 35 members of the Leyden congregation began preparations for their journey to North America, a service of celebration was held by the entire church during which Robinson admonished the pilgrims to remember "that there is yet more truth and light to be had forth from God's Holy word." This was the spirit of the pilgrims, there was more to be learned, more to be revealed, more ways to serve if they remained open to hearing what God was saying.

John Robinson was not among the church members who sailed on the Mayflower in 1620. He had planned to join a second wave of pilgrims but became ill and died in 1625 at age 50. Robinson attempted to testify to the truth of God's grace and he tried to create the structures and forms of the church that would keep the truth alive among Christians. Even to this day we are beneficiaries of all those in our congregational heritage who held religious freedom to be sacred.