

This is the last Sunday of the Church calendar, which we call Christ the King Sunday. It's a liturgical feast that was only established in 1925. One might think that it was instituted at an odd time in history, just when the whole idea of monarchy was dying out. But it can be very pertinent now as we try to sort out our thoughts about the brutal terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Paris and Mali.

We are confronted with a clash between our American version of democratic individualism and the embodiment of Truth itself in Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim as king. Who will we choose as having authority in this terrible moment of history?

In this morning's Gospel the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus shows two diametrically opposed visions of the world, and responses to violence and evil.

Pilate is the outpost of Roman power in Judea, and as such he stands for all empire, the Roman empire and every one since, down to our own American power. He embodies empire in its vision of force, control, order and law.

Jesus, on the other hand, was clear that he is not a king in a sense that Pilate would recognize. He says, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'

All Pilate can understand is that he does claim to be a king after all. Jesus' reply is, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate's only response is to ask him, 'What is truth?'

It is not clear whether he answers with this dismissive sophistry because he does not understand Jesus, or because he understands him all too well and fears such a presence in his ordered world.

For Christians, this interchange lays out the two kinds of responses that can be made to the terrible violence that wracks our world. In the manner of empire, we can respond to terrorists in ways that are currently being recommended by numerous presidential candidates: bomb them to oblivion; keep them well away from us; don't permit any Muslims to enter this country; show them who's boss; exterminate them. This is the answer of the world when it is frightened.

On the other hand, one might look to Martin Luther King Jr. to hear something different.

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Through violence you may murder the liar, but cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

So who is telling the truth to our bitter times?

My former Yale classmate, Barbara Lundblad, professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary, tells of one of her students, an Anglican priest from South Africa. She writes

“Not long ago he shared a story about what it was like to believe Jesus was King during the days of apartheid.

“Our whole congregation was arrested,” he said, “for refusing to obey the government.” I thought I misheard him, but he went on to say that all 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail -- from babies to a 90-year-old man. ‘At least babies and mothers were kept together,’ he added. The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year. To claim that Jesus is King can be dangerous.”

Do we resist the truth of Jesus because we don't believe it's practical or because it carries risks that could turn our lives upside down? The way of empire and control is seductive in its claims of effectiveness and safety.

As part of my morning meditation, I offer prayer for those who have died. I have rotating lists of church members, family, people I knew personally, and the martyrs of our time. One man on my list is Kenji Goto, a Japanese news photographer who converted to Christianity about 18 years ago. In spite of the dangers, he returned again and again to Iraq, Somalia, and Syria because he felt it was crucial to document the effects of war on the ordinary people who

lived there, especially the children. He had a passion to let the world know, to try to focus attention where it was needed.

His final trip to Syria was made in an attempt to rescue another Japanese man who was being held hostage by ISIS. Ultimately he himself was captured by the militants, held hostage and then beheaded.

He had said in emails before his death, "Closing my eyes and holding still. It's close to a prayer. It's the end if I get mad or scream. Hate is not for humans. Judgment lies with God. That's what I learned from my Arabic brothers and sisters."

When his family heard the news of his death, his 78-year-old mother said, "It is my only hope that we can carry on with Kenji's mission. He has left us on a journey."

His wife, Rinko said in a statement, "My family and I are devastated by the news of Kenji's death. He was not just my loving husband, and father to our two beautiful children, but a son, brother and friend to many around the world. I remain extremely proud of my husband who reported the plight of people in conflict areas. It was his passion to inform the rest of us of the tragedies of war."

We all have choices of our own to make – not necessarily to walk the front lines of insane fanaticism, but choices all the same: about our beliefs, and which responses by our government we will support or call for. In an age of blood in the streets, good men and women murdered by terrorists, which reality are we going to choose?

Will it be the seduction of supposed control represented by boots on the ground and drones in the air, or will it be a sacrificial living of the call of Jesus? Will we recognize that we were baptized into the 'kingdom not of this world', or will we call out with the crowds, "We have no king by Caesar!"?

Ours may not be an era of royalty, although we are perpetually fascinated by Queens and Kings who serve as glamorous props for tourism. But our King Jesus, with no glamour at all, came as the servant who testifies to the truth. Pilate and the world ask, "What is Truth." And although Jesus did not respond when the empire asked that question, he did answer it for his disciple, Thomas: "I am the way, the truth and the life." May we be the disciples who follow that truth on the way that leads to real life.

