



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***Christ the King*** ***The Rev. Sharon Gracen***

*November 22, 2015*

Talking about Christ as Lord and King made a lot more sense in Jesus' time than it does in ours. The concept of democracy and people power has overcome historic ideas of monarchy and lineage and succession. We get to experience the vestiges of such traditions by watching the British royal family journey in and out of relevance. We do still observe a powerful monarchy in places like Saudi Arabia. Generally having a king locates power in that one person. The history of the kings of Israel began when the disparate tribes realized that things were not going well. They had enemies and some horrific crimes and it appeared to them as if having a common leader would be a good idea. After all, every other nation had a king, why shouldn't they. The prophet Samuel and God were not happy because Israel was not meant to be like other nations. They were meant to be an ideal nation, in which all people chose to live together in peace with justice. That proved hard to achieve. What the people were asking for was someone who would take care of them, make decisions for them and be a strong man to defend them and keep them safe. In other words, to relieve them of the responsibility of living into God's ideal for human society.

This morning, we heard Jesus' dialogue with Pontius Pilate. Pilate was an employee of the Roman Empire, an empire which kept people in line, made decisions for them and maintained the mightiest army the world had ever seen. That army kept Roman citizens safe but woe to anyone else. The people of Israel desperately wanted their own king, someone who would fight back, drive out the occupying presence of Rome and secure their borders. They wanted a king so they could feel safe. So Pilate looked at this scruffy backwater preacher and asked, "Are you a king?" Jesus had been aware from the beginning that few would understand the kingdom that he proclaimed. It isn't a kingdom like others, with military might and tightly enforced laws. So he confused Pilate with his answer..."my kingdom is not of this world." Pilate could not understand that Jesus' followers would not fight for him. They would not use violence on his behalf because to do so would be to destroy the very kingdom he proclaimed. This was the kingdom that Martin Luther King sought as he taught non-violent resistance to injustice. In his book *Where do we go from here; Chaos or Community?* he wrote,

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org)

203-488-2681

*e-mail* [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



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*"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you 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. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."*

Jesus has invited us to be his followers. That doesn't mean that we get to hide behind him and let him fight our battles and fix things for us. The Greek word for *follow* doesn't mean simply to fall in behind but rather to walk in the same way, to become the same as. Jesus never promised to keep us from frightening situations, in fact he was pretty clear that we will encounter behavior from the world that is frightening. His path certainly was, in a way that we can hardly imagine. The prospect of being crucified is scary and the reality of it excruciating. Rome counted on that. The fear of violence is natural. How we react to that fear is the challenge of our faith.

We are afraid right now because there are apparently people and forces in this world that want us to be. Our fearful response to the murders in Mali, Paris, Beirut, a southern church, and a school in Newtown, is money in their bank. The question before us is, "do we want to play the game by their rules?" Jesus did not. He knew that the only way to undo a violent power was with unexpected love and courage.

My daughter, Melanie, spent her junior her of college in London. She had applied directly to the University of London rather than going through one of the existing Study Abroad programs at Indiana University. As a result, she was heading over to England by herself, without the security of a group. There was to be no one meeting her and helping her get through the London tube system with two huge suitcases. I sat with her as she waited for her plane. She turned to me in considerable distress, her eyes filling with tears, and said, "Mom, I don't know why I got myself into this, I not a brave person, you know." We moms always want to have a wise and comforting answer at such times. I'm sure I didn't have one. I'm also pretty sure that the Holy Spirit came to my rescue when I told her that being brave didn't mean that you don't get scared. It means that you go ahead and do the scary thing anyway. And that once you've done it, you will have beat the fear. Fortunately she went ahead and got on the plane and it changed her life, her impression of herself and ability to use her many talents. She's been scared plenty of times since then but she has never let fear limit her.

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So, what about those scary refugees? This feels like a "rubber meets the road" moment for us. My job is to try and put such moments in the context of the Gospel. That doesn't mean that I am telling you what to do or what to think or what to believe. What I do hope is that in the presence of fear, in the presence of people who are telling you to be afraid, that you will do some work to understand your feelings of vulnerability. I hope that you might ask "is my fear legitimate? How much do I actually know about what frightens me? What are the sources of the information that I allow to get into my awareness and what is their motivation? Are they encouraging me to be afraid and if so why?" These types of questions are important for us to make the choice between fear and love, between fear and hospitality, between fear and courage. The truth is that no leader, no matter who we elect, can guarantee that we will be absolutely protected from people committed to doing evil things. Shame on us if we believe someone that would tell us that they can. Shame on us if we believe that the same old violent responses will produce new results. We cannot overcome terrorism with bombs or prisons. All that will do is to create more terrorism.

Taking out our fear on families fleeing terrorism in their homeland hardly seems like a Jesus response. There is a lot of reassuring information available to us as we look at the possibility of welcoming a Syrian family into a chance at a new life. The current petty and inaccurate rhetoric about the threat that Syrian Muslims represent is not worthy of a nation of immigrants. It is not worthy of people who think of themselves as Christian.

On this Christ the King Sunday, what do we expect from this king? What do we expect from ourselves as his followers? If we have understood his story, then we will not expect to never be afraid. But we will always know that he has gone before us into fear and pain and he has promised to be with us as we face the evil powers of this world. And he has promised us resurrection, new life out of the wreckage of the old. King of kings...Hallelujah!

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