

*Common Worship in Separate Places  
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church  
London, Ontario  
and their friends*

*The 26th Sunday after Pentecost  
(The Feast of Christ the King)  
21 November 2021*

*To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.*

*Opening Words*

L: I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord;

**P: the first and the last, the beginning and the end.**

L: Let us worship God.

*Prayers of Adoration and Confession*

O God our Sovereign, we praise you for sending us your Son, your beloved one, in whose dying and rising you accomplish the victory that crowns the ages. In him you reveal your own love at work, uniting heaven and earth. By your Holy Spirit, secure our hearts to the goodness of your will, and to the rule of your Son. Praise and blessing be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful One, have we been ruled by the devices and desires of our own hearts? Have we bowed before false gods of our own making? Have we failed to be governed by your justice and love? Help us to see ourselves truly, as you see us. Help us to repent. Forgive us, and help us to forgive. Assure us that we belong to you, and set us on the path that leads to abundant life.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

**P: Christ, have mercy upon us;**

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Everlasting God, whose sovereign will is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, our Lord and King. Free the world to rejoice in his peace, to glory in his justice, and to live in his love, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

*An Assurance of Pardon*

L: "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

**P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.**

***Prayer for Illumination*** O Lord and Sovereign of all, open our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may receive your truth with joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 132** (*The Eternal Dwelling of God in Zion*)

O Lord, remember in David's favour  
 all the hardships he endured;  
 how he swore to the Lord  
 and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,  
 'I will not enter my house  
 or get into my bed;  
 I will not give sleep to my eyes  
 or slumber to my eyelids,  
 until I find a place for the Lord,  
 a dwelling-place for the Mighty One of Jacob.'  
 We heard of it in Ephrathah;  
 we found it in the fields of Jaar.  
 'Let us go to his dwelling-place;  
 let us worship at his footstool.'  
 Rise up, O Lord, and go to your resting-place,  
 you and the ark of your might.  
 Let your priests be clothed with righteousness,  
 and let your faithful shout for joy.  
 For your servant David's sake  
 do not turn away the face of your anointed one.  
 The Lord swore to David a sure oath  
 from which he will not turn back:  
 'One of the sons of your body  
 I will set on your throne.  
 If your sons keep my covenant  
 and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
 their sons also, for evermore,  
 shall sit on your throne.'  
 For the Lord has chosen Zion;  
 he has desired it for his habitation:  
 'This is my resting-place for ever;  
 here I will reside, for I have desired it.

I will abundantly bless its provisions;  
 I will satisfy its poor with bread.  
 Its priests I will clothe with salvation,  
 and its faithful will shout for joy.  
 There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David;  
 I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.  
 His enemies I will clothe with disgrace,  
 but on him, his crown will gleam.'

*(Said together)* **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

### *A Reading for the Day*

**St John 18: 33-38a** *(Jesus stands before Pilate)*

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'

Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'

Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?'

Jesus answered, '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 to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?'

Jesus answered, '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 asked him, 'What is truth?'

**L:** This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

**P:** Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St John 18:38** *"Pilate said, 'What is truth?'"*

Francis Bacon alludes to this scene in the opening words of his famous 'Essay on Truth': "'What is truth', said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer," he wrote.

But it was a nervous jest because Jesus unnerved him. Pilate didn't 'stay for an answer' because the enigma that Jesus *is* made Pilate walk in circles of indecision. Four

times in that remarkable trial (we heard only a portion of it today), Pilate scurried from his inner courtyard to the terrace outside, from Jesus standing still in front of him to the seething crowd braying for blood outside his window. Back and forth, back and forth he goes. Pilate can't make up his mind.

He must have thought: "Who *is* this peasant, beaten and brought to me in handcuffs? He won't confess, he won't apologise, and he won't beg for clemency. There's something 'regal' about him. Is he a dangerous rival or a harmless nobody?"

"Are you a king?" he asks.

"Oh, is *that* what you heard?" says Jesus.

"Now don't get smart with me," says Pilate. "What have you done?"

"If you must know, all I've done is witness to the truth," says Jesus. "My kingdom is nothing like yours. Yours is built on coercion, bribery, and the power of the sword. You use fear and violence to rule. If my kingdom were like yours, that's what I'd do too. But my kingdom is nothing like yours. They may as well belong to different worlds, your kingdom and mine."

"So, you *are* a king. Gotcha," says Pilate.

"You may very well say so," says Jesus, "but I couldn't possibly comment. Except to say this: I came into the world to testify to the truth, to be its witness, its martyr," he says.

It's as though Jesus is sharing his trade secrets – one ruler to another ruler – only Pilate can't fathom it. Jesus looks so weak, after all. So why is he strangely intimidating too? He has no sword hanging from his belt, no treasury to fund a standing army, no media empire. All he has is 'truth'. Only, it's not the kind of truth one may happen to know in a second-hand way, like a guru who passes on hints and tips for better living. Jesus' power is the truth he *embodies*. He can't be separated from the truth he *is*, the truth of God. But Pilate can't see it.

"If you are of the truth, Pilate – if the truth is welcome in your heart – then you will hear my voice," says Jesus. "If *truth* is your Sovereign, not Caesar, you'll be loyal to the truth. You'll turn and follow me." Is there anything more daring than that?

But the truth in Jesus' voice sours in Pilate's heart. "What is truth?" he asks. I picture him saying this with a sneer, cynically, like a washed-up journalist on a bar stool who has spent his life covering politics. "Don't tell *me* about truth. Whose truth? Yours? Mine? The crowd's? What *is* truth anyway?" he says.

"He would not stay for an answer," said Francis Bacon. Pilate turned away from Jesus at that point, so he could put the violence of the Empire in motion. And in a matter of hours, Jesus would die on the cross.

There's a harrowing scene towards the end of Orwell's famous novel, *1984*. Winston, the protagonist, has been arrested and beaten. But that's not enough for Big Brother. Winston lives in a *Totalitarian* State. And the State won't rest until it totally breaks his spirit, totally dominates his soul, and makes him totally swallow the Big

Totalitarian Lie. For the truth is not sovereign in that world. Big Brother is. And Big Brother is served by the Party. The truth is whatever the Party says it is, the 'Big Lie', a phrase we hear again and again in the troubled nation to the south of our border.

Winston had kept a forbidden diary. Now it's used against him. He'd written, "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four." In other words, freedom happens when we're bound by truth above all else, when the truth is our sovereign. Not what we *want* to be true, not what the Empire would force us to believe and do, but when the Sovereign Truth has our loyalty, *then* we are free.

O'Brien is Winston's torturer. He won't allow this. Big Brother requires Winston's total loyalty. He holds up four fingers. He says, "How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?"

"Four," he says.

"And if the Party says that it's not four but five – then how many?"

"Four," he says. O'Brien gives the signal, and an electric shock passes through his broken body in a spasm of unbearable pain.

This goes on, and on, until Winston gives in, verbally. He colludes with the Big Lie – "It's five. Five fingers, not four..." he cries in agony. But that's not enough for O'Brien and the Party. In a wicked parody of a forced religious conversion, O'Brien says something like this to Winston: "The Party doesn't just want your outward obedience. You are a heretic. We do not destroy the heretic... We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him."

"How is this different from Christianity?" says the cynic. Or brainwashing? Or fear-induced faith?

But Christianity, if it's *real*, cannot use force, threats, coercion, or torture. It can't use them and still be Christianity. If it does, it undoes *itself* in the process. All it has is the truth embodied in Christ and broadcast in love in his Spirit. It's symbolised by Christ's Word and Sacrament. It calls for our loyalty. It's enacted in our own lives.

Only truth should capture our consent and bind us to itself. 'Two plus two' really *do* make four; we're bound to that truth once we see it. Something dies deep within us if we deny it. In the same way, only love can capture our hearts and imprison them (the love that 'will not let us go'). To be human is to realise that the thrones for truth and love lie within us. When *they* rule us, *then* we are free.

Jesus called people to follow him, freely. They were never chained to him. Neither did he didn't ask them to trail behind him like tourists following a tour guide. To follow him, he said, was to take part in the truth of his passion: "take up your cross and follow me," he said. "Live the truth in love."

In his words of truth and his deeds of love, in his skirmishes with antagonists and his healing encounters with hurting people, Jesus embodied God's kingdom.

His rule is the very opposite of Empire. Empire needs violence needed to sustain its Big Lie. Jesus saw right through this. He saw the few dominating the many, the rich

exploiting the poor. He saw lepers and lawbreakers shoved to the margins. He saw the apparatus of religion colluding with Roman oppression. And in the face of what he saw, he lived and spoke good news to the poor, bread for the hungry, comfort for the afflicted, forgiveness for sins, healing for hurt, and a place at the table for everyone evicted by Empire.

In all of this, Jesus was anything but weak. He had power enough to cause a vicious backlash. For Jesus was not teaching a new style of meditation, or personal growth, or inner enlightenment. He was out to heal the whole world, to 'save' it from its Big Lies.

He dares us to live in accordance with the truth he shows us – to *follow* him, in other words, to embody a new way of living in a new kind of society, in the world out there, where Caesar is still King.

### ***Prayers of Intercession***

God most gracious, though nations rise and fall, you reign for all time. For when the time was right, you showed us your power in the weakness of Christ, your majesty in his mercy, whose crown is a wreath of thorns, whose throne is a cross. Hear the prayers we make in his name.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ. Holy Lord, without your Word the Church has nothing to say, and without your Spirit we are lifeless. Give your Church a Word to speak in these times, and your Spirit of truth to strengthen us; so that, inspired by the unity and love of your people, drawn from every race and nation, the whole earth may be led to sing your glory.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

God our judge and redeemer, in your law we learn the demands of love. Give to those who write new laws, to those who judge others by them, and to those who enforce them in the streets, compassion for human life, a high vision of your justice, and a deep humility in their calling.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Because Christ rules with love by sharing our sorrow, we pray for those in great need today: for those who are lonely, sick, or sad; for those in our land who are hungry and will sleep outside tonight; for victims of abuse and violence; for the animals and people who endure the effects of flooding in British Columbia; and for those whose pain is inward and unknown, save only to you.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

With thanksgiving we remember those who have died and now share in Christ's peace, and we keep a time of silence in God's presence to pray and to listen....(*keep a time of silence in God's presence*)....

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

God most high, our beginning and our end, rule in our hearts. Keep us loyal to your love in all our living, and faithful to your truth in all we say and do. Make us patient to await the day when every tongue shall confess your name, Christ shall be all in all, and we shall see you face to face, our God and King.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen**

### ***Benediction***

*(Said together)* **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**