

Have you ever considered the word “the?” It is one of the most commonly used words in the English language, yet when used with a modifying word or phrase, it describes things that are unique. We speak of “the” Statue of Liberty, “the” University of Connecticut or “ the” Episcopal Church, all things which are unique unto themselves.

The feast day that we celebrate today, however, is an example of something so unique that it needs no modifier, the word “the” is sufficient to indicate its uniqueness. When we speak of Christ the King, we affirm that the kingship of Christ is unlike any other kingship, that his kingdom is unlike any earthly kingdom, that his reign is unlike the reign of any other ruler.

In the Gospel reading for today, we hear the familiar story of the beginning of Jesus’ interrogation by Pilate. In John’s version of the story, Jesus is not silent as he is throughout the accounts found in the synoptic Gospels. He looks Pilate in the eye and loudly and clearly speaks his truth. In response to Pilate’s opening question, he proclaims that he is indeed a king but that his kingdom does not belong to this world.

The Greek is somewhat complex during this whole exchange (typical of John’s Gospel), but one thing is clear: Jesus is not talking geography here. Rather, he is saying that his kingdom is different, that it does not function the way that The Roman empire functions. As an example, he states that if his kingdom functioned like other kingdoms, then his followers would have fought for him, would have used violence to counter the violence of the Romans. But as it is, Jesus confirms that this is not how his kingdom operates.

This example that Jesus uses to describe how his kingdom operates is not casually chosen; the message of non-violence is at the heart of Jesus’ teaching and stood as one of the distinguishing features of the early church. Think of Jesus’ teaching to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile, to return good for evil, and to pray for those who persecute you.

Throughout the first century, soldiers were not accepted as members of the church until they

left the army. In the sixth century, Columba, an Irish monk was exiled from his native land because of his participation in the battle of Cuil Dremne. (He later went on to found the famous monastery on the Island of Iona.) It wasn't until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the Church developed the so-called "just war" theory which permitted violence when certain conditions were met.

The issues of war and violence are apt topics for consideration in light of the recent terrorist attacks in the Middle East, Paris and Mali. As Americans, we believe that terrorism is the contemporary face of evil in the world and that terrorist groups need to be eliminated. As you are all well aware, there is a lively and contentious debate among politicians and statesmen around the world about how to achieve that end. As Christians we not only have a stake in those debates, but also have a unique perspective to add.

In today's world the use of force is a necessary tool to be used in the pursuit of peace. But the use of violence is fraught with problems. As President Jimmy Carter and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, both Nobel Peace Prize winners, have said publicly, war may sometimes be a necessary evil, but let us never forget that it is always an evil.

The problem is that violence always begets more violence, and war inevitably leads to more war. Listen to the powerful statement of the Re. Dr. Martin Luther King in his book, ***Where do we go from here: chaos or community:***

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.(1)

I stand with David Lose, President of Luther Seminary, who wrote in his weekly blog: “ I think the perpetrators of the violence in Paris and terrorists everywhere should be opposed vigorously, fought tirelessly, and brought to justice whenever possible so that there is less such violence in the world. But in the church, we need also to witness that there are limits to the reach and outcome of force.” (*In the Meanwhile, November 16, 2015*).

The question is, how do we do that? How do we stand up for peace, love and non-violence while going to war against terrorism? At least one way is to stand with those who have been the victims of violence and to demonstrate compassion to those who have suffered through war. As Christians, we need to welcome refugees fleeing from war, violence and terrorism.

The question of accepting refugees has sparked a major political controversy in this country. Politicians of every stripe are asking questions like who should we accept? With what restrictions? Under what circumstances? These questions have only one source: fear, a normal human reaction in the face of threat and danger. As followers of Jesus, however, we need to replace fear with courage; we need to respond to those in need with faith and compassion.

Listen to the words of Trevin Wax in an Op-Ed piece for last Sunday's *Washington Post*: “Almost a thousand years ago, the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas, whose interactions with Muslim thinkers led to some of his greatest works, wrote, ‘Fear is such a powerful emotion for humans that when we allow it to take us over, it drives compassion right out of our hearts....’ So, in the midst of a worldwide battle against the evil of Islamic terrorism, we must make sure that we do not allow fear to overwhelm our hearts, crowd out our compassion, or fundamentally change our character. For compassion to win, courage must conquer the fear in our hearts.”

During the past week, many religious leaders have spoken out strongly and vigorously, just as Jesus did when confronted by the face of evil. Let me share a few of these voices with you:

From Ed Bacon, Rector of my home parish, All Saints in Pasadena, CA:

“We will not allow these terrorist acts to make us less human or compassionate because that is terrorism’s goal: to turn us all into terrorists. Instead we will overcome the narrative of nihilism with respect for the dignity of every single human being. And we will gather to be reminded not to forget that we belong to each other.”

From Scott Hayasi, Episcopal Bishop of Utah:

“Jesus is our teacher. He taught us to hold firm, to be brave, to lift up those who are oppressed. He taught us that the least of the people were those that made up the kingdom of heaven. Let us be disciples of Jesus.”

And finally from our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry :

“In times like this fear is real. And I share that fear with you. Our instinct tells us to be afraid. The fight-or-flight mentality takes hold. At the present moment, many across our Church and our world are grasped by fear in response to the terrorist attacks that unfolded in Paris last Friday. These fears are not unfounded....And yet, especially when we feel legitimate fear, our faith reminds us ‘Be not afraid.’ The larger truth is that our ultimate security comes from God in Christ.”

This is more than a theoretical discussion for us; we have an opportunity to take action and to stand up for the voice of compassion. A resolution was passed at last week’s diocesan convention urging all parishes to support the resettlement of refugees in the state of Connecticut, in cooperation with IRIS ( Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services in New Haven) or some other relief agency. At its meeting following our service this morning, the

Vestry will discuss the implications of this resolution for Church of Our Saviour. It provides an invitation and opportunity for us to get involved in God's mission in an important and life-giving way. Everyone is welcome to attend the meeting and contribute to the discussion.

In closing, I want to state what so many have implied: in order to defeat terrorism, force and violence will be necessary. But in order for this approach to be effective, it must be used alongside actions that are peaceful, compassionate and loving. The more of us who contribute to these efforts, the stronger the forces of peace will become and the sooner the Kingdom ruled by Christ will prevail over the kingdoms of the world. Amen.