

*A sermon for St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Yarmouth, Maine, preached by the bishop, Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 7 May 2023, Fifth Sunday of Easter. To God be the glory.*

Yesterday there was a Coronation. I'm not going to ask if you got up at 4:30 in the morning to watch it, but do raise your hand if you caught the slightest bit of coverage from yesterday.

In this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. John's gospel, Jesus speaks of his departure this morning. And these words are mostly familiar to us because they're often read at funerals. Jesus says he's the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him.

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears this probably sounds exclusive, and from the foundation of our progressive-minded practice of Christianity, it's hard to square with our commitment to welcoming all people, to being inclusive.

There isn't a single one of us here who is 100% certain about our faith 100% of the time. Added to the normal and healthy human capacity for skepticism, and the mind's ability to think and analyze, it's no wonder we're not always crystal clear about who we are, and who Jesus Christ is. For one thing, most of us bristle when we hear news of Christians in the United States because more often than not the Christianity portrayed in media blends faith with nationalism. I cannot tell you the times I yell at the Alexa in my kitchen, "Jesus isn't an American!"

The late bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong, wrote a book entitled, "*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalists*"—to address the problem that a fundamentalist interpretation of Holy Scripture means that the person of Jesus Christ, his birth, life, nature, death, and rising again cannot be the same for me as its for Marjorie Taylor Green.

Think with me about this statement from Jesus...I am the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me. Instead of hearing it as a statement of exclusivity or lack of welcome to others, consider the facts of who Jesus was, and who he is now. His entire life was about pointing to a new way, a reign of love and of justice, because the Roman government literally crucified God's people. In the face of that oppression, God's people continued to practice a Judaism, and Paganism, that often ignored the basic needs of neighbors who were poor and oppressed.

Here, let me be clear: I am not criticizing ancient Jews and their religious devotion. I'm saying that as soon as the institution colludes with the oppressor we become oppressors ourselves. And that's what happened.

Today too, and not out there, but right here in The Episcopal Church. Let me give us two examples:

- 1) Episcopalians were chief architects of residential boarding schools for indigenous children, places that we now know were places of terror and abuse.
- 2) The Episcopal Church stayed together during the Civil War, whereas most other Protestant denominations split. We used to proclaim this staying together as some grand moral achievement. Now we know that it was a reflection of our cowardice and our collusion and interest in the institution of slavery. The reason we didn't split is because the Episcopal Church, in the north and in the south, benefited from the economics of enslaving people.

So, we are people who live in glass houses. We are not looking back at history and saying, "the Jews got it wrong and so Jesus came to make it better."

We are they who follow a Lord who wanted the institution to free itself from practices that kept people oppressed, and his way of life, his way of speaking the truth, just his way of being—it was of God and it is a way for all humanity, not as a prescription, but as invitation and as grace.

There was a coronation yesterday, it's true.

But there's one in Yarmouth today, right here in this exquisite sacred space with God's people called to be St. Bartholomew's Church. It's true, and it's made more true for me as I witness to the ways you practice Christianity and the way you show me how to follow and love Jesus Christ.

In our reading from 1 Peter we are told, "*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*" A royal priesthood, a holy nation. This isn't Christian nationalism, but rather a symbol for our authority and grace to work together so that mercy is something every person knows.

At THE coronation yesterday a young chorister faced the King and said, "Your majesty: as children of the kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings." King Charles replied, "In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve"

The Way, The Truth, the Life. Majesty and mercy, justice and peace—they have kissed each other—and so we are they who join God to make marvelous light known right here and now. Amen.