

“Look Around You!”

*(Pilate) asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”
Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world . . .
I came into the world to testify to the truth.”
Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”
(John 18:33b, 36a, 37, b, 38a)*

*Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice!
“Reader, if you require a monument, look around you!”
(Tomb of Sir Christopher Wren, architect of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Christ the King Sunday, **November 25, 2018**
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In London there are many historic places to visit, St. Paul’s Cathedral among them. On one of my visits to that church, the group I was leading arrived as a visiting choir was rehearsing for that evening’s performance. Sacred music filled the church as we toured the cathedral, its 365 foot high dome, inspired by Michelangelo’s dome at the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, dominating the London skyline for over 300 years.

John Wesley, the Anglican minister who would become the father of Methodism, came here on the afternoon of May 24, 1738 and, like my group, listened to a choir.

Later that evening, a seminal moment in Methodist history, he walked to nearby Aldersgate Street where he experienced his “*heart strangely warmed*” moment, the launch not only of a deeply personal revival, but also the spark that grew into the Methodist movement.



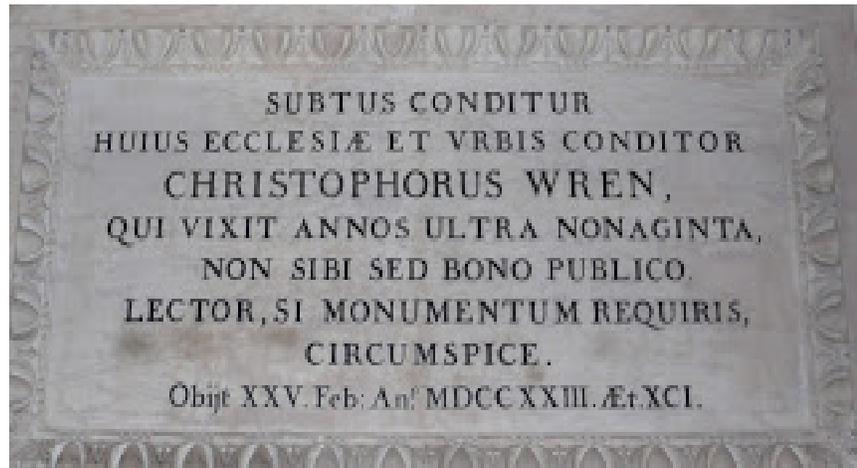
After touring the church I gathered my group around the statue of Mr. Wesley in one of the courtyards, there to share the story of the 34 year old John Wesley and his Aldersgate Street experience.

The Wesley statue is one of many monuments found at St. Paul's. Throughout the church and its crypt ornate monuments fill sacred spaces, the largest being the Duke of Wellington sitting astride his horse, Copenhagen. Nearby is the marble sarcophagus of Horatio, Lord Nelson, who had been killed at the Battle of Trafalger in Spain in 1805.

Among the tombs was a surprise to be found in the quiet corner where Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of the cathedral, had been laid to rest. One would imagine that the architect of this

magnificent cathedral would have erected a most monumental monument.

But no, instead was this plain slab, the bottom lines read: "*Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice!*," (*Reader, if you require a monument, Look Around You!*).



His monument, in other words, was the church itself. Here's the full

translation: *Here in its foundations lies the architect of this church and city, Christopher Wren, who lived beyond ninety years, not for his own profit but for the public good. Reader, if you seek his monument – look around you. Died 25 Feb. 1723, age 91.*

In the For-What-It's-Worth department, those of you who are from or have lived in Michigan, as did I, living and studying in Ann Arbor for 10 years, may be interested to know that the official state motto of Michigan is a Latin phrase inspired by Sir Christopher Wren's tomb. That phrase is, "*If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look About you!*"

The idea is that in the absence of a monument we are invited to see the most obvious monument of all, something that can't be missed if you will just look around.

Why do I tell this story on Christ the King Sunday? Today is the last Sunday of our church's liturgical year. For the bulk of the twenty-seven Sundays of Ordinary Time our paraments have been green, a symbol of life and growth. Today, though, they glow white as if to say, "*Look Around You!*"

I love it that our American holiday of Thanksgiving is set in this last week of the church's liturgy. Thanksgiving invites us to *Look Around*, to *Count our Blessings*.

In today's lectionary gospel reading from John 18 I hear Jesus saying to Pilate, "*Look Around You!*" Let's take a moment to remember the scene this passage is describing. On Friday morning Jesus looks nothing like the king whom the people had welcomed into the Holy City only five days earlier, on Palm Sunday. He had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before and had spent the lonely night in a dark pit after his trial before Caiaphas.

A king? This man? It's no wonder that Pilate asks him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Naturally, Pilate would need an answer to that question, since his boss in Rome would have his head if he allowed a political rival to stir the people to rebellion.

Jesus does not deny that he is a king, but identifies his kingdom as being "*not of this world.*" Where, then, Pilate would ask, do I look for your kingdom? In what world does your kingdom exist? Any kingdom needs borders. What are the borders of your kingdom? Where do I look for it, so that I might know if it's a threat, or benign?

In Jesus' answer to that question I see a "*Look Around You*" moment. My kingdom? You can't see it geographically. I can't map it out for you. My kingdom is not of this world. When I say, "*Look Around You,*" I am asking you to look with the eyes of your heart.

That's when Jesus uses the word I want us to focus upon, truth. *I came to testify to the truth.* I can hear Jesus saying, "*Earthly kingdoms, such as your Roman empire, must have their borders. The borders of my kingdom are not located by GPS. The boundary line of my kingdom is truth itself. Know this truth, and you own citizenship in my kingdom.*"

"*What an upside/down kingdom is this!*" Pilate must have thought. Grabbing on to that word he asked his most famous question, "*What is truth?*"

Now, I need to wave a wand and transform the sanctuary, just for a few minutes, into a Greek class in order to take a stab at answering Pilate's question. The word *truth* in the Greek New Testament is *aletheia*, meaning, "*not forgetting.*"

In Greek mythology the River Lethe was one of five rivers in Hades, the river of oblivion flowing through the Cave Hypnos, or, Sleep. Here the recent departed would take a drink in order to forget. – sins, troubles, pain, suffering. How sweet to put all this in the past and forget, so that one can "Rest in Peace" in Hypnos.

Odd, I think, that the word *truth* derives from that image and yet, it does. Now, you're still in my Greek class, so stay with me. The word for truth, *Aletheia*, takes the name of the river Lethe and tags it with a prefix, *a*. We call that "*a*" the prefix of negation. So *a-letheia* means "*not forgetting.*"

The prefix "*a*" can turn a word around and make it



do a 180. A preacher may say of the culture, it is a-moral, without morals. A doctor may say of a patient that they are a-symptomatic, no symptoms. A sports writer may say that the 2018 Razorback football season was a-typical, not ordinary (Thank goodness!). A person may proclaim themselves an a-theist – no theism, no belief God.

Truth, you see, has a “not-ness” about it, an absence. So, when Jesus says, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life,*” he is saying that the path I offer to life is through truth, through *Not Forgetting* that you are God’s beloved child. *Look around you!* Remember who you are!



“Quid est veritas?” “What is truth?”
Russian painter Nicolai Ge (1831 – 1894)