

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

LEADER: Grace to you and peace from him who is, who was, and who is to come.

ALL: And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness of God's creative love.

LEADER: God has made us to be a kin*dom—

ALL: A communion of being we discover in love for one another.

LEADER: Open our hearts to Jesus' call—

ALL: To build on Earth a community of justice and peace.

Drawing on African American experience, Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964) describes the image of God as “a singin’ something.” An educator who eventually gets her doctorate from the Sorbonne in Paris, Cooper teaches and writes in the era after Emancipation and the Civil War when whites reconstruct limits on black folks’ freedom.

This period of social backlash aimed to put blacks back in their place after the dynamic push for freedom. Catholics live in a backlash dynamic today as some seek to return the Church to the way it was before the renewal of Vatican II.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Theologian Karen Baker Fletcher explores Cooper’s unique analogy for how we humans are like God, an analogy that arises out of African American spirituals and blues. Usually theologians identify reason and will as the human characteristics that make us like God. Cooper identifies voice and music as the irrepressible human and Holy Spirit in us, crying out against oppression and indignity.

The slave era generated an African American Christianity. Evangelizing introduced slaves to the God who heard the cries of the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt and sent Moses to lead them to freedom. In Jesus African Americans found someone like them who suffered at the hands of temple and empire officials but whom God did not abandon and

instead raised up. They found Christ their kin and king.

Singing is one of the most intimate actions humans do together. We make single chords out of multiple voices. We listen and get a chord so in tune it activates the harmonics at every octave, ringing higher and higher, mystically. We become more together than we are alone when we sing. We feel together and inspire one another.

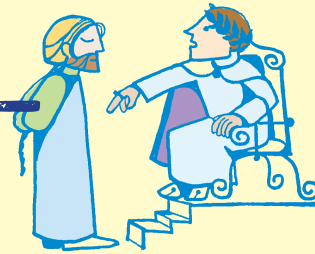
We also theologize together in the words and melodies when we sing. Spirituals sweeten the irony of some Christians’ hypocrisy, “Everybody talkin’ about heaven ain’t goin’ there.” The black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” remembers the history of slavery and the price ancestors paid for survival and freedom. Singing these

songs awakens the “singin’ something” in us, our soaring spirit and likeness to God, the source of our human dignity.

● When has music stirred the “singin’ something” in you?



GOSPEL



Jesus testifies to the truth.

NARRATOR: Pilate, the Roman governor, summoned Jesus.

PILATE: Are you the king of the Jews?

JESUS: Are you saying this on your own, or have others been telling you about me?

PILATE: I am no Jew. Your own people and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?

JESUS: My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my

kingdom were of this world, my subjects would be fighting to save me from being handed over. My kingdom is not here.

PILATE: So, then, are you a king?

JESUS: It is you who say I am a king. The reason I was born, the reason why I came into the world, is to testify to the truth. Anyone committed to the truth hears my voice.

John 18.33-37

To what truth does Jesus testify?

The Church celebrates the Feast of Christ the King as the culmination of the liturgical year. This feast holds up in Jesus an alternative vision of power for leaders in our world. Jesus testifies to truth that is not armed and ready to fight but to the truth he demonstrates in feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, raising Lazarus. Jesus reveals God's power is love that heals and gives life.

Only in John's gospel does Jesus have a conversation at his trial with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate is an infamous character in human history.

The Jewish historian Josephus remembers this Roman finance minister and collector of taxes for his cruelty to the Jews of ancient Palestine. When they protested

the images of Caesar on the standards of the Roman soldiers, Pilate turned the soldiers loose on the crowd. When Jews objected to using temple funds to build an aqueduct, Pilate again sent out the soldiers.

Christians may remember Pilate most as a politician who listens to the crowd. Sunday's gospel focuses on the setting of Pilate's dialog with Jesus, which takes place at the Roman headquarters in Jerusalem. Temple priests have brought Jesus before Pilate, who has the power to sentence Jesus to death. These officials stay outside the building to avoid Gentile contact that would prevent participating in Passover the next day.

Pilate meets with the religious officials outside in

the public world and with Jesus inside in one-on-one conversation. Outside Pilate is a politician in charge of protecting the social order and negotiating with the leaders of the people he governs. Inside he, as an individual, encounters Jesus but resists making a judgment about who Jesus is.

In John's gospel Jesus comes from above, from God. He is the pre-existent Word who was with God from the beginning and through whom all things came into being. In becoming human and dwelling among us, the Word reveals God. Jesus comes from God and testifies to what he has seen and heard with God (8.38; 12.45).

In John's gospel those who believe in God hear Jesus' testimony as from God. Pilate is not such a listener although Jesus intrigues him. In Pilate, we see a man who wants the crowd to free him from a decision he fears making. It is not truth that governs his decision making but political calculations and an acute lack of courage.

Making the expedient rather than the just or truthful decision is all too tempting for most of us. Pilate may be us.

- **How are you like Pilate?**
- **What tensions do you experience between your private and public life?**



Their dialog about whether Jesus is a king invites Pilate to see and understand who Jesus is. The see, judge, act process is simple, but Pilate cannot step outside the values of the Roman Empire any more easily than we can recognize ways our culture obscures the truth.

We live in a society in which the media daily

Catholic social teaching is a helpful resource in our search for truth today. It presents a vision and set of principles for making practical Christian judgments in our world. The first and most basic principle testifies to the “singin’ something” in every human person, the sacredness and dignity of being made in God’s image and likeness.

The second principle recognizes the human person is social and thrives only in relationships with others. Other principles describe our rights and duties, the dignity of work and rights of workers, the need to care for creation and for the poor. Catholic social teaching urges global peace and development.

Catholic social teaching identifies three steps for getting at the truth—see, judge, act. The first step challenges us to notice and explore conflicts and tensions in our world. The second step calls us to make judgments in the light of Jesus’ teachings in scripture and the Church’s teachings about social justice. These two steps obligate us to act, to make a difference.

- **When did you first realize justice is a religious issue?**
- **How do you take time to listen to your “singin’ something” and give voice and melody to its insights?**

In his exchange with Pilate, Jesus asks the procurator to make a judgment.

hammers us with sound bites that may not be true in context and promotes fear to sell advertising. To follow Jesus we must testify to the truth within us, in the gospels, and in our tradition that recognizes the sacredness of every person. This requires making a habit of actively discerning and judging how we can contribute to the common good.

As Christians we can’t help but see Jesus in the least and can’t dodge the work of including the least in our care—in our families, our social circles, and global neighborhood. We must turn to one another to help out rather than take advantage.

- **What truths do you hold self-evident?**
- **What local issues do you see needing action? What do you observe? What in your judgment needs to change? What actions will make a positive difference?**

C
H
A
R
I
T
Y

J
U
S
T
I
C
E

DO SOMETHING

- Download a poster of the principles of Catholic social teachings at goodgroundpress.com.

The powerless wait for divine intervention.

Two centuries before Jesus, the Greeks ruled Jerusalem, a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Some of these rulers commanded Jews to eat pork and offer sacrifices to Greek gods. Those who disobeyed faced torture and death for treason.

Jews had little power or hope for their political future. They looked to the heavens in this time of grief. This period sets the scene for the prophet Daniel's vision of a human figure, a Son of Man, coming on the clouds of heaven. In the vision this king accepts rule over all nations, displacing earthly tyrants.

That people trust God will deliver justice is comforting yet disturbing. This vision calls us to work for justice in our world.

Headlines stun us, sometimes paralyze us, and often animate us. We hear our own children crying in war-torn countries. More silently, poverty and hunger affect one in five children in the U.S. whose families live on incomes below the poverty line, \$29,960 for a family of four.

Tribal and religious conflicts split up families and put people at tragic risk on the seas and in the deserts. Again many are children.

Immigrants arrive with needs for homes, schools, work, and language skills. Some citizens resent and resist their presence among us.

Powerless people should not have to look to the heavens to be delivered from their oppression. It is our work as human beings to respect and honor the needs of other human beings. The God of our faith has a reputation for shaking up the rich to lift the downtrodden from their misery. God needs our human gifts and talents to deliver justice.

God will rule again.

I saw one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven. When he reached the Ancient One and was presented to him, he received dominion, glory, and kingship. Nations and people of every language serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away; his kingship shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7.13-14

- Who acts with justice in your community, family, and neighborhood?
- How have you experienced God's calling you to action so that justice may rule?

PRAY

Reflect on all your group has shared. Be silent and listen to the call of the Spirit in those experiences.

LEADER: (*Pause after each question.*) Who close to home or far away should expect us to be their deliverers? What does this reading, reflecting and sharing ask of us in our local parish community? How does a local community connect in solidarity with people from other nations? What specific action does our seeing and judging require of us?

Make a commitment to act, and share it aloud. (*Pause.*)

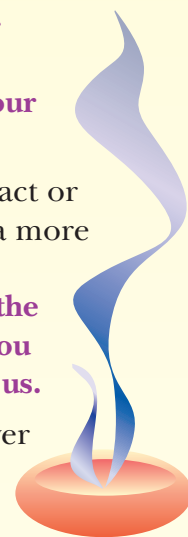
LEADER: God, we know that our faith is both private and public.

ALL: We know in our deepest hearts that we can choose or not choose to be instruments of your peace.

LEADER: We can act or refuse to act for a more just world.

ALL: We revel in the knowledge that you never give up on us.

Sing or say, "Prayer of St. Francis."
Gather #726.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

GIFT ALERT

Make Advent brighter, more prayerful with the *Advent Names of God*. Seven images and prayers rooted in Israel's longings for a messiah, reimagined in our evolving cosmos today. View sample pages at goodgroundpress.com

