

The Reign of Christ & the Promise of Paradise

CHURCH OF SAINT CLEMENT · SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2019 · 9 MINUTES 10 Reads

The Last Sunday after Pentecost Year C

Reign of Christ

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Luke 23: 33-43

In the Name of One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This sermon has been one of the harder sermons for me to write. I know that I am going to have this one-sided conversation with you all this morning – just after two weeks of testimony surrounding the possible impeachment of our President.

Accusations are flying back and forth. Some people listening to the testimony are sure they know the truth. Others say they have no idea how to distinguish fact from fiction.

What is clear to me as I listen to snippets of testimony and snippets of commentary is not the complete story of what happened in Ukraine (and why it happened) – but rather that folks on both sides are seeking to win the support of the American people. Or at least the support of those who represent the American people. It does not matter to these folks what the content of the testimony is – it only matters how it plays out in the minds of their targeted audience.

Both sides are seeking our allegiance and our votes. And they are doing so by scaring us.

It is as if they are saying – “if you do not ascribe to the position of us Democrats – or us Republicans – a) you are stupid and small minded and possibly immoral and b)

you should be very afraid that the life you currently enjoy - or the freedoms that mean so much to you - will be taken from you.”

And you know what – everyone is listening. Half the country has been following this story closely. Tuning in and getting riled up. Think about your own response to the hearing. What has it done to your blood pressure? Your mood?

None of you are violent people. I am not a violent person. But you may have had that thought and I have had that thought, “Oh, I want to kill that man (or that woman).” Not really. But the thought is there. “I hate that guy. What a miserable excuse for a person she is; what a traitor, what a scumbag.”

It’s as if we are thinking the very same things those people were thinking so many years ago, on a hillside outside Jerusalem. At the place called the Skull.

It was there that an accused traitor was hanging on a cross - hanging between life and death – hanging shamefully between two other criminals. A traitor. A scumbag. A threat.

Our King.

I think this particular reading from Luke’s Gospel assigned to this year’s celebration of the Reign of Christ is especially appropriate for all of us. There is no other reading that can show so clearly the distinction between Christ and those that lead us day in and day out – here in this country and around the world.

Our leaders summon our allegiance from the court of public opinion.

Our leaders summon us to fear.

Christ summons our allegiance from the cross.

Christ summons us to love.

And here in this summons lies the other important point found in this reading. The same moment Christ is mocked as a King is the very same moment Christ becomes

our King – and his becoming King is through an act of recognition, mercy, forgiveness and promise.

The criminal says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Christ inaugurates his Kingdom from the cross and it is to this Kingdom we have pledged our allegiance through our baptism.

So the other important point we must consider today is not only how very *different* Christ is from our leaders, but also how we must *live into* the Kingdom of God – that completely counter culture answer to the Kingdom our world celebrates – a worldly kingdom based on privilege and fear, guided by a sense of scarcity and greed, and focused on closing ranks - rather than opening our arms in love.

Of course this could be a really easy sermon to delivery if I were just to stand here and talk to you about how much better life would be if Jesus were President of the United States. But when we talk about Christ as King, which is what we do every year this Sunday before Advent, we are not just talking about how much better it would be if Christ were in charge. Rather we are talking about what it means for us and for *our work* that Christ IS in charge right now – and we are all living under his rule – right now – in *His* Kingdom – just as we are living in the one being led by mere mortals.

Though there are certainly glimpses of humility, courage and eloquence among these mere mortals (Thank God!) – many of our leaders are acting like children. Truth is being manipulated. I see it happening with elected officials, and I see it happening in the life of my six year old. It's the same damn thing.

And -

The poor are still poor.

The marginalized are still marginalized.

The sick are still sick.

And people are bickering and grandstanding. All for political gain. It's a power grab and it's ugly. As I said to one person – reading the newspaper this week is like injecting poison into our veins.

Of course – I am not advocating turning a blind eye to what is happening in our world. We need to stay informed. We need to know what is happening in our world. But we also need to be attuned to what is happening in God's world – because from the moment those words were uttered – “today you will be with me in paradise” - we live in both.

The criminal says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

And now finally we get a glimpse of what paradise was like – in the garden – long ago – and we hear a promise that paradise is not found only in the past – but is very much a place we might find ourselves today.

It is in this moment, writes David Lose*, that “Jesus was announcing the advent of an entirely different way of being in relationship with each other and with God.”

“It's not the ruler that changes,” he notes, “but the realm in which we live.”

This is certainly good news. But as Lose says, “This makes matters a little more complicated...”

If proclaiming "Christ is Lord," - meant simply giving our allegiance to a different ruler, then most of our lives could remain untouched. As long as we didn't swear allegiance to some Caesar or king, we could more or less conduct business as usual and conceive of faith as a largely private affair.

But the kingdom – or *realm* - of God that Jesus proclaims represents a whole new reality where *nothing* is the same -- not our relationships or rules, not our view of self or others, not our priorities or principles -- nothing. Everything we thought we knew about kings and kingdoms, in fact, gets turned right on its head.”

Any of us who have read the parables know this to be true. In the Gospels Jesus says more about the Kingdom of God than anything else. We hear all about this Kingdom – it's a world in which a shepherd leaves 99 sheep to look for one which was lost, in which a social outcast – an avowed enemy – stops to help a man who was beaten by bandits, a place where an old man hosts a huge feast when the son who he thought was lost was, in fact, found. The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of mercy, forgiveness and promise - and thus celebrates all that is so very different than what our world seems to celebrate – success, victory, and righteous retribution.

Lose continues, "If we believe that Christian faith isn't just allegiance to a different sovereign but rather is entrance into [this] entirely new realm, then who knows what God will expect from us."

This is the complicated part.

"No longer can we keep our faith a private affair and ignore the need of our neighbor. No longer can we sing robust and rousing hymns about God's glory and majesty and ignore the plight of God's good earth. No longer can we pray that God's kingdom come and yet manage our wealth as if it actually belonged -- rather than was entrusted -- to us. And no longer can we relegate the realm of God to a comfortably distant -- or for that matter frighteningly near -- future. The realm and rule of God is all around us, beckoning us to live by its vision and values even now."

So how do we live in both Kingdoms simultaneously – the one that sucks life out of us – and the one that gives life to us – over and over again?

I think one answer can be found within the walls of this church and through your relationships with the people sitting beside you, the ones who are here now, and the ones who will come to and through these doors in the months ahead.

How do we enter into the kingdom that breaks in all around us like winter light on a January morning – clear and dazzling?

It seems to me we can look to the cross before us and remember the one who hung from it, who from the depths of pain and shame, saw the humanity of the lost, the

image of God in one who was condemned as worthless, who showered mercy, forgiveness and promise on a common criminal.

And from our memory of Christ and his action from the cross and in OUR LIVES, we can step out of our own fear and into the light of Christ. We can reach out our arms of love. We can welcome the lost into our fold. We can see the image of God in those around us.

And we can forgive – our leaders who have failed us – over and over again – and our friends and neighbors who have wronged us – even those here in this church.

And, most importantly, we can forgive ourselves – we who succumb to the siren song of our world and the leaders who tempt us to think that this world with these rules (that might makes right, that we aren't enough, and that we must be scared of all our many enemies) - is the only choice we have, the only realm in which we can live and thrive, the only world in which we can find peace and safety and value.

We can forgive ourselves and live into the promise of paradise – a Kingdom where love and mercy reigns – forever.

Amen.

* David Lose in Dear Working Preacher 2010