

Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King
November 20, 2016
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

On this last Sunday of the church year we hear in the gospel the story of the crucifixion. Jesus is hanging between two thieves. The crowd is standing by as their leaders mock him. “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Over his head is a sign that says: “This is the King of the Jews.”

The ultimate irony. A king, nailed to a cross, hanging between two thieves.

One of the thieves echoes the crowd and taunts Jesus. “If you’re the Messiah, save yourself – *and us!*” The other does not follow the crowd. No, he sees something different in Jesus. He sees an innocent man, unlike himself and his fellow thief, and yet one who is bearing in his body the full force of imperial power, the violence and the suffering. Such blunt violence is calculated by the empire to keep order, to preserve power, and to define the norms by which the world under its authority will live.

And, mysteriously (or miraculously), the second thief, whom tradition calls Dismas, sees through the lie, and he says to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It is that kingdom that we celebrate today on this Feast of Christ the King. He is clearly a different kind of king than others – one who even in the face of violence, torture, and death, embodies the way of love. And he did so by going through the cruelest depths of human experience in order to shine a bright light on all of the evils and injustices that support this world’s systems of domination and control.

Torture. It is defined as “the action or practice of inflicting severe pain on someone as a punishment or to force them to do or say something, or for the pleasure of the person inflicting the pain.” Torture is now, of course, banned in US and international law, which is not to say that it no longer happens and indeed might happen again in the future. But for much of human history it has been used as an inhumane instrument of social control that is aimed not only at the accused, but also as an example to all who might contemplate resistance to the world’s unjust systems of power and domination. And that was certainly the case under the Roman Empire. They used an especially cruel and inhumane method of torture – crucifixion, which led to death by asphyxiation, prolonging the agony that followed the beatings and the bloody spectacle of nailing a human being to a cross of wood. And then that cross was erected at the most public of intersections where everyone would see the painful spectacle, the humiliation and the suffering. Normally the bodies were left in place for several days while they were

picked apart by the vultures. All of this was a very deliberate message to those who passed by: “Don’t mess with Caesar. If you do, this is what will happen to you.”

Jesus’ death on the cross is not the end of the story, as we know. When he had breathed his last breath, some of his friends asked if they could take his body down from the cross and bury him before the Sabbath arrived -- part of the deal the Jewish authorities had with their imperial occupiers. They laid him in a borrowed tomb. And on the third day afterward, when his friends arrived at the tomb, he was not there. He had risen from the grave. Forty days later, after numerous appearances to the disciples, he ascended into heaven where he reigns in glory. Cross, grave, resurrection, ascension.

The early Christian community held to a simple creed that stood in solidarity with the one who had changed their world and their understanding of power. The earliest and simplest Christian creed is just three words: “Jesus is Lord.” And this was not simply a pious statement; it was a statement of radical protest against Rome’s imperial creed and the world’s systems of domination and control. What it meant was, “Caesar is *not* Lord. *Jesus* is Lord.” The story of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension offered a new narrative by which to live, in which the forces of evil and control cannot overcome the ultimate power in the world, which is the power of love. An innocent man died a cruel death, but instead of exacting vengeance and perpetuating the cycles of death and destruction, he bore the suffering of the world in his own body, and overcame even death and the grave, showing him to be Lord of all. And all other loyalties would be subservient to this one.

We heard in Jeremiah’s prophecy the desire of Israel for a righteous king who would “deal wisely, and... execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.” This vision of a messiah from David’s line was deeply ingrained in Israel’s expectation, and many indeed saw this in Jesus.

But Jesus’ own messianic proclamation seems to go beyond such limited expectations, and instead arises from his understanding of a different tradition – the tradition of a coming Reign of God. Jesus has a radicalized view of the coming Reign of God as “the vindication of the poor and the oppressed.” His vision of the Kingdom is neither nationalistic nor other-worldly. The coming Reign of God is expected to happen on earth, as he taught the disciples to pray – “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” In other words, the earthly realm becomes a reflection of the heavenly. It is a time when structures of domination and subjugation have been overcome, when... basic human needs are met (daily bread), when all dwell in harmony with God and each other —when we are not led into temptation but delivered from evil.¹

Paul evokes the early church’s emerging sense of who Jesus was in the Epistle to the Colossians from which we heard today: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (quoted from Gail Ramshaw’s *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*)

for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

So, why should any of this really matter to us today? And what does it have to do with our being followers of Jesus in our own time?

We have to admit from the outset that when we hear the words “Christ the King” the language of kingship is somewhat problematic for us. After all, we fought a war of independence over such things 230 years ago, against monarchy as a system, and in favor of republicanism – government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” to which most of us are, presumably, still committed. (Although you may have seen the stories of people here in the US petitioning Queen Elizabeth to take us all back following our recent election.) And then, of course, Christ the King has such patriarchal implications and associations, too, making it even more problematic.

So, let’s just speak of Christ the image of the invisible God – the one to whom we owe our highest allegiance, our deepest reverence, and our undying loyalty. As followers of Jesus, we see all other power as provisional and subject to judgment, and our ultimate allegiance is not to a state or a nation or to any particular party or leader, but to the one who transcends them all, the one whose life, death and resurrection points us to another way. And that allegiance will be what guides us in our role to help shape and bring into being on earth, the realm of God’s own making.

Walter Brueggemann says that the church

...as it embraces the new order... will make a new practice of mercy and justice in the face of poverty, hunger, war, hatred and greed. In costly ways Jesus' power for life regularly evoked opposition [for his earliest followers]. So it will for citizens of the new order [today]. Celebrating "Christ the king" is easy until we try to embody our citizenship, which quickly butts [up] against our other loyalties and many other vested interests.²

It is not always easy to live into this new world, this vision of the world as God intends it to be. Like Dismas, and yes, Jesus himself, we can sometimes feel as if we are suffocating from the powers that surround us. I love what Suzanne Guthrie has to say about this:

Dismas haunts me this time of year – Dismas, the “good thief” who recognizes Jesus as King in those last hours of torture upon the cross. Bloody, exposed bone and muscle ripped open from scourging, naked, gasping for breath as his lungs fill with fluid, dying in unspeakable pain from every tortured nerve in his body, he turns his head toward the similarly dying Jesus. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” A cynic might say that

² I ran across this quote from Brueggemann in my files, but am unable to cite its origin.

Dismas has nothing to lose by such a request besides precious air in his lungs. But this is no hedging of bets. Dismas sees through the horror of the cross into the kingdom's throne. And Jesus manages to gasp out these words: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Dismas! In all this chaos between the end of Ordinary time and the beginning of the end of time, this minor, vulnerable voice in the drama stands out for me. With his last breath, he asks Jesus to remember him, and at that moment, no matter what he has done in his life, his crimes, troubles, regrets, tragedies, blasphemies disappear, and he is Christ's own forever.³

So, with Dismas, today we pray, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." "Jesus, do not leave us alone and afraid and overwhelmed by what we see happening around us, but help us to have a vision of your perfect realm – yes, on earth as it is in heaven." His promise is that he will be with us always, even to the end of the world.

³ Suzanne Guthrie in *At the Edge of the Enclosure* (<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/reignofchristc.html>)