



The Reign of Christ in a Broken World
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 1:68-79, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43
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It would be understandable if your thoughts upon hearing today's gospel lesson ran something like this, "who messed up the scripture readings? It's not Good Friday, it's the end of November! Why are we hearing about the crucifixion? For that matter, why do we have a painting of Jesus with the crown of thorns on his head on the bulletin today? The Christmas lights are going up! It's almost Advent. It's that time of year when we should be feeling a warm, cozy, glow, not thinking about Jesus' suffering and death."

This passage does seem out of place. I confess that when I first looked at the scripture readings for this Sunday, I thought, "Oh! This will be interesting." But this passage is exactly where it's supposed to be on this Christ the King Sunday, as a pointed reminder about just what kind of king Christ is.

A bit of history about this Sunday before we go any further. Most of the liturgical year—Lent and Advent, Christmas and Easter developed over the first few centuries after Jesus lived. But Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new addition to the church year. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and was originally on the last Sunday of October. In 1970 it was moved to the last Sunday of the

liturgical year, just before we begin a new year with the season of Advent. Christ the King Sunday is celebrated now not only by the Roman Catholic church, but by the Anglican church and most mainline Protestant denominations. Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ Sunday crowns the liturgical year, so to speak. We finish the church year by remembering and celebrating the sovereignty of Christ—by proclaiming that Christ does indeed rule over all, and by reaffirming that one day Christ's reign will be fulfilled and complete.

With so much turmoil, strife and uncertainty in our country and world, this reminder of Christ's sovereignty is timely. We need the reminder that what we are living through now is not what God envisions for us and is not the final word. We also need the reminder that Christ is a different kind of king than those who hold worldly power, and Christ calls us to live by a different standard as we follow him.

Now let's go back to Luke's account of Jesus on the cross. Jesus was not the king first century Judaism was expecting or hoping for. The inscription over him mockingly says, "This is the King of the Jews." How can this be anyone's king, dying such an ignominious,

cruel, torturous death? Crucifixion was a form of execution for the worst of criminals, those who had committed heinous crimes or were enemies of the state. Christ the King who rules over all, suffered the lowliest, most humiliating form of death. This tells us exactly what kind of King Christ is—one who suffers the worst humanity can offer, not one who charges in and conquers his enemies in battle. As commentator Joel Green writes, “the crucifixion seals the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and king who accomplishes the divine purpose precisely as the suffering one.”¹ Hence the portrait of Christ the King on the cover of today’s bulletin. Jesus becomes king through his suffering and death, as the artist wrote, “In my painting. . . we see that Christ the King received the crown of heaven because he wore the thorns of death on earth.”²

Remarkably, one of the criminals hanging next to him is the one who sees Jesus for the king he is, saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He knows they are both going to die. Jesus is not going to get off that cross and save himself or the two hanging beside him. They are going to die, yet this man believes that Jesus is indeed a king, coming into his kingdom through death. Jesus confirms his belief, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Jesus’ realm is not in the far distant future, it starts today, it started that very day as they hung on the cross, facing death. In his ministry, Jesus told those who followed him and came to hear him, “today the scriptures are fulfilled in your midst.”³ In

bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, in restoring sight to the blind, in all his healings, Jesus was proclaiming that the kingdom of God was present. “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons,” he told the crowds, “then the kingdom of God has come to you.”⁴ And again, when the Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered, “the kingdom of God is among you.”⁵

The kingdom of God is among us wherever the work of Christ the king is being accomplished. Where people without food find a meal, where people with no home find shelter, where lives are saved and strangers welcomed, where the poor find opportunity, and the oppressed are given their rights, where the lonely find company, where sinners receive forgiveness—that is where we find the reign of Christ among us. Christ’s reign is not complete, the kingdom is not fulfilled, but it is very much present, and we are members of that realm, here and now. As the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright wrote, Jesus didn’t come “to teach people how to get into heaven.” . . . “The whole point of Jesus’s public career was not to tell people that God was in heaven and that, at death, they could leave ‘earth’ behind and go to be with him there. It was to tell them that God was now taking charge, right here on ‘earth’: that they should pray for this to happen; that they should recognize, in his own work, the signs that it was happening indeed; and that when he completed his work, it would become reality.” Wright continues, Jesus “wasn’t

¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997) p. 810.

² Father Ronald Patrick Raab, C.S.C.

<https://ronaldraab.com/2015/11/21/our-lord-jesus-christ-king-of-the-universe/>

³ Luke 4:18-21.

⁴ Luke 11:20.

⁵ Luke 17:21.

teaching his followers how to rise above the mess of this world. He was training them to be kingdom bringers. . . The gospels are not about 'how Jesus turned out to be God.' They are about *how God became king on earth as in heaven.*" ⁶

When we proclaim the sovereignty of Christ, it has everything to do with our lives and the life of our world here and now, not just in the future, either after we die, or when Christ's realm will be complete. Christ is king now, and if we proclaim that and follow him, it affects every aspect of our lives as individuals and as a church. Our passage from Colossians says, God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." We are not just transported to that kingdom after we die, we have already been made a part of it. We are redeemed and forgiven for our lives here and now, not just for our life after death.

So what does that mean, that Christ is King here on earth, here and now, and not just in the glorious future? For that, we can turn back to our passage from the prophet Jeremiah, which was probably written more than six centuries before Jesus walked the earth. Jeremiah wasn't writing specifically about Jesus, he hadn't a clue that the longed-for Messiah would be born as Jesus of Nazareth half a millennium or more after his death. But he did have a clear vision of the kind of king God would raise up for his people. The kind of king the Messiah would be. In this today's lesson, Jeremiah is speaking out against the rulers of Judah, not just the king, but all those in power, the shepherds who, instead of

minding and tending and protecting their flock have scattered them and driven them away. They failed to tend them. To get a clearer picture of what is going on here, you need to go back and start reading at chapter 21 verse 11. There, Jeremiah begins this section, saying, "To the house of the king of Judah, Hear the word of the Lord." And the prophet goes on through the rest of that chapter and the next to make it very clear what the rulers have and haven't done, and what they must do if they want to save their nation and their rule. "Act with justice and righteousness," the prophet says, "and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place."⁷ The failure of the rulers and leaders of Judah to act in righteousness is directly tied to the coming of the Messiah—or rather to the fact that the righteous king has not come. Jeremiah says, "if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of his house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David. . . . But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation."⁸ When the leaders do not live in righteousness and instead practice violence and oppression then the Lord is not amongst them and their house and nation will suffer. God tells them through the prophet that to do justice and righteousness, to treat the poor and needy well is to know the Lord. The king and all the leaders have turned away from the Lord, and it proves to be their downfall. They are conquered by Babylon and taken into exile.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2011) pp. 144-45, 148-49.

⁷ Jeremiah 22:3.

⁸ Jeremiah 22:4-5.

Our passage for today from the beginning of chapter 23 continues this section of Jeremiah. A shepherd was a common image for a king in the Ancient Near East. And Judah's kings, and all its leaders, have failed to be good shepherds. "Woe to you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord." But God promises to raise up for the people a righteous king. One who will deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land. In fact, this king will be so identified with God's righteousness that he will be called, "The Lord is our righteousness."

In his commentary on Jeremiah, Patrick Miller, Old Testament Professor Emeritus at Princeton, writes, "These texts are an indictment of any leader or ruler or of any ruling system that allows the rich and the powerful to exploit the labor and energy of the poor and the weak in order to enhance their own lifestyles." . . . He continues, "These texts equate the relationship to God with the maintenance of justice in the human community. . . . There is no separation of the social and the spiritual. The willingness to ignore matters of justice while continuing to praise the Lord and worship is precisely the state of affairs that existed in late pre-exilic Judah."⁹

Have we learned anything in the millenia since God spoke to God's people through Jeremiah? Reading through this section of Jeremiah, the parallels between Judah then and our society now are striking. The prophet could be speaking to us. Both Jeremiah and Jesus make it clear that we cannot be in a right relationship with God if we are not working to right the wrongs of our society, if we are not working to treat the poor fairly and end oppression. To proclaim Christ as King means

following him, it means being "bringers of the kingdom" as N.T. Wright says, it means praying "thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven," and then working to make that a reality in as much as it is in our power to do so.

Next Sunday we will move into the season of Advent, which is not just getting ready for Christmas, it is hoping, waiting and living expectantly in anticipation of the fulfillment of Christ's reign, the coming of Christ in glory. As we celebrate the reign of Christ and anticipate his coming may we take this time to reflect on what it means to live as members of Christ's realm, may we discern anew what it means to live according to the righteousness of God, and as though the kingdom really is among us as Jesus said. May we remember that we proclaim a king who wore a crown of thorns and came into his kingdom through suffering.

We worship and serve a ruler who turns his back on worldly power and makes his reign known by serving others. May Christ's reign so be known in us as well.

Amen.

⁹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 746.