

Proper 29 – Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C – November 21, 2010

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, also known as Christ the King, and the day on which we celebrate Christ's reign. Many of us probably associate royalty with wealth, honor, all kinds of pomp and pageantry, as well as power. Humiliation and crucifixion are not usually words we put in the same sentence as king, nor is the word prisoner. Bishop Desmond Tutu has said the Western world would experience a "spiritual bankruptcy" if it were deprived of the "moral capital" of its prisoners. He says this in reference to some of his close personal friends – those who have been advocates of social reform and justice – who have also spent a great deal of time in prison. Tutu links them to a lineage of notable greats, including John Bunyan, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. We should remember that Jesus was also arrested, and held prisoner, as was the Apostle Paul.

In today's Gospel reading, we read about another prisoner, one who has been remembered in history for being crucified alongside Jesus. One, whose simple request of our Lord has become the graceful assurance of salvation for all who call on Jesus' name. A man who set aside his own agony on the cross to rebuke the unrepentant prisoner for his lack of insight and compassion at the crucifixion of an innocent man. Along with the crowd of witnesses gathered at the place called The Skull, we also meet a group of Roman soldiers, and the Jerusalem leaders who have engineered this travesty of justice. Quite the ensemble! A crowd, a king, two criminals, the corrupt, and the captors. Where do you and I stand today?

The first thing we notice about Luke's account of the crucifixion is that there are three levels of escalating mockery extended by three groups or individuals of diminishing status. The first are the religious leaders, the arrogant scoffers. Next are the Roman soldiers, the ignorant mockers, who ironically accurately name Jesus as King. Finally, there is the unrepentant criminal, who blasphemes Jesus by denying His messianic status, and Jesus' ability to save. In all the scoffing directed towards Jesus, there are also echoes of Jesus' temptations by Satan during his forty days in the desert. The leaders try to provoke Jesus to prove that He is the Messiah, the chosen one of God. They are greedy for a sign of power. Their image and expectation of God's Messiah is quite contrary to God's gift of Jesus. In their spiritual conceit, they have failed to hear God's voice in the words and teaching of Jesus, and failed to open their hearts to Him. Jesus resists feeding their terrible hunger. He also resists their demands for a display of power, or rather a misuse of power, contrary to God's will.

One theme of Luke's Gospel is the invitation to respond to Jesus. Those who scoff and mock Him during the last hours of His earthly life are aligned against Jesus, and therefore against God. Jesus draws this sharp distinction in Luke chapter 9 when he tells the disciples not to stop one who is doing good deeds in His name saying, "for whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). The two criminals being crucified beside Jesus respond to Him in very different ways. One demands of Jesus "save yourself and us!" The other criminal immediately rebukes him, in the same way Jesus rebukes the demons. Rather than fearing God, the first criminal maligns God's chosen instrument of salvation. He also assumes Jesus is guilty, whereas the second criminal proclaims Jesus' innocence, and the injustice of Jesus' death. In contrast, the second criminal addresses Jesus by name, and affirms two aspects of Jesus' identity that the scoffers deny: Jesus as Messiah and Jesus as king. The words "remember me" were used as a messianic address during Jesus' lifetime. They are part of the many prayers to God. Hannah, Nehemiah, Job, Jeremiah, and the Psalmists also pray to God, "Remember me". "Remembering" therefore carries with it the implication of an appropriate response. The criminal is confident in Jesus' authority to act on His remembrance. The second criminal's insight extends to recognizing Jesus' suffering and crucifixion as the precursor to the fulfillment of His role as savior, and His kingdom reign.

Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." When Jesus says, "today", He's not talking about a twenty-four hour period in the way that we understand that word. 'Today' is also

more than the day of His crucifixion and death. “Today” is the day of Messianic salvation inaugurated by Jesus. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts ... But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end’” (Hebrews 3:7-8, 13-14).

The only other words Jesus speaks in this passage are, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” That’s quite a prayer for someone who has been unjustly condemned to death, beaten severely, and nailed to a rough wooden cross. The leaders look up and see failure and a dying man. They see an end to Jesus as a threat to their little fiefdoms of corruption and greed. What does the crowd see? What do you and I see as we witness Jesus on the cross? All we know is that worldly injustice, Jesus’ horrible punishment and humiliating condition at that very moment in no way separate Him from God, or jeopardize His intimate relationship with God the Father. His prayer is not for Himself, but an affirmation of God’s grace, God’s forgiveness available for all. To the last, Jesus practices his redemptive ministry and teaching to pray for all who abuse us. The ruler of God’s kingdom does not meet evil with evil, but repays evil with good. It has been said, “Jesus and this criminal, illustrate the truth of divine salvation. Salvation does not mean avoiding the cross...but it means having faith, even when dying on the cross. It means having faith to proclaim that Jesus is the powerful King, precisely when He's on the cross – and when we are dying or just ‘deflated and destroyed by [all the] suffering and evil [in this world]’” (Pastor Brian Stoffregen).

Today’s Gospel reading is stuffed with the kind of prejudices, bigotry, and violence that is antithetical to any effort to both broaden and widen God’s kingdom of peace and justice; love and equality. The Scriptures are God’s gift to teach us. We cannot be complacent. We cannot allow ourselves to believe for one minute that even the Christian community, you and I, are entirely free from our own prisons. It may or may not be literal incarceration, but many are trapped by emotional or psychological prisons that are no less real than bars of steel. Others are snared by prisons of addiction, or abuse. Becoming a follower of Christ doesn’t immediately relieve us of all biases or the temptation to judge others. We are all works in progress. We are clay in the Potter’s hands, and instruments being carefully tuned to resonate with God’s love. But just as Tutu says, despite our prisons we still have “moral capital” to share. Even in our flawed condition, we are doing good, reaching out, and loving our neighbors. This is our grateful response to God. This weekend is our 3rd Annual Gift Fair. Yesterday alone we raised over \$800 selling fair trade crafts in support of the artisans of SERRV International and African Team Ministries, as well as through gifts that keep on giving like the animals available through Heifer International. Come and see what other great organizations we are supporting. This community of faith shares God’s love and proclaims the Gospel in so many life-giving ways.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we say, “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.” God’s kingdom is not like any earthly kingdom. The kingdom of God welcomes the humble in heart, and all who call on the name of Jesus Christ. God’s power is made perfect in weakness. It may look to the world like humiliation, death and defeat, but the cross is the means of our salvation through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. God’s glory is nothing like the world’s idea of glory. It is the wonder of unconditional love and grace. God’s glory shines brightly through all who follow Christ, and see the beauty of serving others in His name.

Amen.