

CHRIST'S REIGN BREAKING IN

11/24/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Reign of Christ (C): Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

There are some weeks when I review one of the designated scripture readings, and I just shake my head. Do we really have to read this out-loud in worship? How does THIS communicate a compassionate, loving God? And then, there are other days, when I think the scripture is presented in a way that is too sanitized. Today is one of those days.

In the passage from Luke, we eavesdrop on two criminals chatting on either side of Jesus. Essentially, their argument is about who they have come to understand Jesus to be, and what that might mean for them in relation to that understanding. But, unless we open our eyes to the actual circumstances they're in, we'll miss the full impact of Jesus' words.

These two criminals, along with Jesus, have already had their trial, their sentencing, and are now receiving their horrendous punishment. They aren't just hanging out in a jail cell shooting the breeze, they have literally been nailed to trees, and have been left to die a slow, torturous death. So, the words they spoke surely would have been labored. Their conversation was likely spat out in spurts, between sharp bursts of mind-numbing pain.

The fact that Jesus is in the same exact situation as he responds, heightens the poignancy of his offer. As a result, his last earthly act, and the last thing done to this criminal, is a touching display of grace and mercy. As this man begs, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

What stands out most for me in that statement is not only the grace and mercy Jesus offers, but the immediacy of the offer. Jesus doesn't ask, "Have you done anything to deserve that?" or say, "Well, time will tell whether you'll make it or not," or even, "You'll probably get there someday." No. Jesus says, "Today...today you will be with me in Paradise."

We aren't told what this man has done, or whether Jesus knows the extent of his crime, but what is communicated is that in God's eyes, none of that matters. The only thing that matters is that this man indicates his belief. In exchange, the man receives Jesus's offer of eternal life; Jesus's acceptance; and Jesus's recognition that this man—a lowly criminal—is also one of God's beloved.

For some reason, I've been thinking and talking a lot about prisons lately. Partly that's because we all have a connection to someone in a local prison: Tyler, the young man responsible for the fires on our campus three years ago. And it's also because a friend of mine who does prison ministry was recently given an expanded role, and has called to discuss her new position a few times.

When she started offering a writer's workshop at a men's state prison outside of Seattle, I don't think she thought of it as a ministry. She was just having fun teaching this course called "The Heroes Journey" and was looking for places in which it might be offered. Because the course is a means of self-discovery and healing through writing, the correctional facility accepted her proposal.

Twenty years later, however, she recognizes how much she has been transformed by her interactions with these men. She tells me they are the most real people she has ever met. It makes sense. They have nothing to lose; life can't get any worse for them, so they're willing to be completely vulnerable.

And, like any one of us, she tells me what they most want and need is to know that they are not defined by their actions; that they are worthy of love. And now that the Catholic Church has appointed her to be a chaplain in the same facility, her job is to remind these men that they are also worthy of God's love.

She shared a story, recently, that sort of blew my mind. She told me about this one inmate, who has the horrible daily job of cleaning up human waste—in all forms—and how he is constantly badgered and belittled by the nurses he is forced to work with. And, yet, when my friend asked their little rag-tag congregation how they might share God's mercy with others, this guy, responded, "Well, I could try showing mercy to the nurses I work with."

Not, "I wish they would show me more mercy", but, "I could show mercy to the very people who harass me." That's what is meant by today's feast day: "The Reign of Christ." That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," that the Reign of Christ is now; that God's love, mercy and compassion is constantly breaking into our lives...even in this moment. And that God's love, mercy and compassion breaks into the lives of others through our actions.

Typically, this day is referred to as "Christ the King" day instead of "The Reign of Christ" day, but other scholars, theologians, and priests, like me, have trouble with the monarchical language. It's a fairly new Feast day begun by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Partially, Christ the King day was a response to growing secularism and nationalism in Europe. But it was also a very in-your-face political move in the context of what was called the "Roman Question". The Roman Question was a dispute about whether the King or the Pope should maintain temporal power over civil territories in Europe.

Those complexities, combined with the fact that we don't really know what it's like to have a king that might swoop in and save us—I suppose most people don't these days—is why I prefer to spend more time talking about The Reign of Christ. Whether the day is labeled "The Reign of Christ" or "Christ the King", the whole point is that God's "rule" is much different than worldly power. Instead of a King that swoops into save us from all that is in the world, our savior calls us to actively participate in the world, spreading God's grace and mercy to everyone.

A contemporary theologian recently said it this way: "Jesus showed [us] another way: to love so generously that we could be called to give our lives for others." That was Sister Helen Prejean talking about the memoir she published this year. Sister Helen has done prison ministry for decades, and wrote another book, *Dead Man Walking*, which was made into a film starring Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins.

My friend and Sister Helen were called to love so generously that they gave their lives for inmates. Richard and I were called to give our lives to you and the Church. Firefighters, police officers, doctors and nurses were called to give their lives to people in crisis. At the same time, I think most of us have this notion that we as individuals aren't actually called in that way.

But Christ's reign breaks into our lives in very simple, ordinary ways. On a larger scale, philanthropists and members of service organizations, like Rotary, are called to give their lives to counteract injustice in our world. Likewise, each of you are all called to give your lives to others...usually in very small ways. Last week, for instance, Christ's Reign broke in at the Showers of Blessings.

When Carolyn Lee went to pick-up the Starbucks coffee that had been ordered for the Shower guests, she was told it wasn't there; that the coffee was being delivered. Arriving on campus, she checked with Joe Arlauskas, but he wasn't aware of a delivery being arranged either. Then, very unceremoniously, drove up the Starbucks District Manager. Somehow, she had heard about the showers and decided to not only deliver the coffee, but to announce that from now on the weekly coffee would be at no charge!

That district manager might not have decided to provide coffee through her love of Christ, but that's how we experienced it; The Reign of Christ breaks into our lives, like a vulnerable baby entering the world, in the most humble forms. An immature faith expects God to be a glorious king—the supreme good guy in the sky, but the gentle savior who offers eternal life, while facing his own human death, models the ultimate self-emptying that creates access for others.

As some of you heard Bishop Susan say last week, that requires a whole lot of courage...courage and faith that God, in whom we find our authority, is with us. So, how will you contribute to Christ's Reign breaking in this week?

As you think about that, I'll offer a word of caution passed along by Sister Helen, whom I quoted earlier. She says be patient for those signs of transformation, and adds: "Don't hold your breath. It's going to take a while." But here's what I know without a doubt: whenever we help Christ's Reign break in, transformation happens...to everyone involved!

—Amen!

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Canticle 16 (The Song of Zechariah/Luke 1: 68-79)

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
 he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior, *
 born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies, *
 from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers *
 and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, *
 to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, *
 holy and righteous in his sight
 all the days of our life.
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give people knowledge of salvation *
 by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God *
 the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
 and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
 as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He 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.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 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. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."