

ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Reign of Christ Sunday November 24, 2019

(The first part of this sermon owes a considerable debt to Rick Spalding and a paper he prepared for the Moveable Feast preaching group fifteen years ago. Rick currently serves as Interim Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan.)

Today, to be candid, is an odd day in the Church's calendar. In the world out there, there are about six weeks left in the year. Out there the focus is on the upcoming holidays... on Thanksgiving on the near horizon and Christmas a month later (though the Christmas music and Christmas sales have been unrelenting for months now!). In Washington, the talk these days is of the impeachment hearings and what they portend. In Europe the future of the European Union and, indeed, of liberal democracy seems to hang in the balance. Syria and Iraq are still in turmoil. The world out there is getting on with its life, living into its uncertain future.

But in here, in the life of the church, today is the *last* Sunday of this year's calendar, the Sunday of Christ the King, or as it is commonly called now, the Reign of Christ Sunday. On this Sunday, we take a look *back* at the ministry of Jesus and *forward* to His ultimate reign at the end of our history, so that we can sense what that reign suggests and commands concerning our lives *in the meantime*. The texts for such contemplation are anything but sentimental. They begin with Jeremiah's words of warning and woe to the "*shepherds*," the prophet's euphemistic reference to the kings and rulers of Judah who have ignored God's call to righteousness and thus have "scattered the sheep" into exile. This passage is part of a long series of oracles, prophetic sayings, which focus on the sad succession of Judah's last kings. Jeremiah aims his words particularly at Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, and he reminds the people that the political and ethical plumb-line against which all kings must be measured traces back to David, "the pastoral king, the royal shepherd."¹ My pastor-friend Rick Spalding says,

The juxtaposition of those seemingly paradoxical images [king...and shepherd] is as essential to the idea of kingship [in Jeremiah] as the juxtaposition of politics and ethics. And it helps to prepare us for the consummate paradoxes of [our text from Luke]: the crucified Messiah, the monarch who renounces the power to save himself in order to save others. Jeremiah's prophetic rage is kindled by kings [and rulers] who forget or willfully ignore a core truth of [God's] people: that the monarchy has no integrity, and the people have no hope, apart from the making of justice and the keeping of righteousness. The epitome of statecraft [for the prophet] is not the [commanding of mighty armies] or the feathering of nests or

¹ Gene M. Tucker in Fred B. Craddock, *et. al.*, *Preaching through the Christian Year (Year C)*, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press International, 1994, 476, as cited by Rick Spalding in an unpublished paper on these texts presented to the January 2004 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

public demonstrations of piety, but simply attending to the needs of the most vulnerable.... Judah's disintegration, Jeremiah says, is the direct result of the forgetfulness of its monarchs on precisely this point.²

Now, remember these so-called shepherds' *forgetfulness* about God's command to care for the most vulnerable and contrast it with our Gospel reading from Luke, in which Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the King, promises that he will *remember* the seemingly expendable human being crucified beside him when his reign begins.³ It is a scene of remarkable and powerful irony, the King of kings left to die on a cross. Someone once observed that all through the ages kings and rulers have sent their people to die for them; Jesus is the only king who died for His people.⁴ At Golgotha, Jesus is surrounded by a chorus of derision, as leaders scoff and soldiers mock, taunting him with the titles they impute to him: Messiah of God, Chosen One, King of the Jews. Jesus is stung by a "crown of scorns" heaped on him by one of those dying beside him, even as he forgives his tormenters.

But the criminal on His other side hears something more compelling in Jesus' words of forgiveness from his cross. He hears "the words of a King, [Spalding says] whose authority is like no other, who prays for those who spitefully abuse and persecute him. [This second criminal] seeks a place for himself in a realm where the keynote is pardon and not recompense, where condemned prisoners can be fully restored."⁵ This one says to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The reign of Christ is a reign and a kingdom that fulfills the promise of the shepherd-king; it is a reign of righteousness and grace and remembrance, a reign where the most vulnerable are sheltered, those of low degree are exalted, and the condemned are set free. Luke describes a reign in which the hungry are filled with good things, the arrogant are scattered, and the powerful are brought down from their thrones.⁶ The reign of Christ the King is a reign where both body and soul are offered healing, where inequities are reversed, and justice and mercy rule together with grace and truth.

We received a most gracious email this week from one of our mission partners at QDEP (the Queer Detainee Education Project), about the workshop we hosted last weekend called "Becoming a Matthew 25 Church: Tools for Advocacy." She thanked us for specific parts of the workshop, but then said this:

I have never [before] experienced the ways in which churches can empower people through the lens of social justice, and I am so glad that the First Presbyterian Church works so hard to do this. Today I walked away with a

² Spalding.

³ Spalding.

⁴ Something like this quote is attributed to Charles Colson; it was mentioned at the 2004 meeting of the Moveable Feast; cf. note 1.

⁵ Spalding.

⁶ Cf. Luke 1:46-55.

refreshed opinion of religious institutions and am glad that you all do the work that you do.

What a gracious affirmation that was! And particularly gratifying to hear, given that it echoed the way we describe our mission and our focus as a city church. But the affirmation is also a challenge to us: always to be who we intend to be.

We know the reign of Christ the King is a reign where both body and soul are offered healing, where inequities are reversed, and justice and mercy rule together with grace and truth. Yet, if that is the way the reign of Christ will be, and we are to shape our lives and our structures and our systems according to His rule, then we still have work to do. We have work to do in the life of the church, for we are called by Christ to carry that work and that challenge into the larger culture as well... work of justice and mercy, of grace and hospitality, of fairness and compassion. Christ calls us to work toward that for which we pray... that God's kingdom will come *on earth* as it is in heaven. The Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks of setting right personal relationships with God, but of more than that, too; it challenges the nations of this world with God's truth and God's demands. It challenges us in this nation...and in this church... as well.

Throughout the political stress of these last years, pastors and congregations all across this land have struggled with how much to say and what to say about the role of faithful people and the role of the church in the current political climate. When pastors gather with one another these days, they talk frequently about what it is like to preach in so-called "purple churches," with a blend of those who lean more red or blue. Some congregants have said, and others have likely felt, that the churches have become too transparently political ... and others have said just the opposite, that the churches have been too timid or too compromised, not nearly forceful or specific enough. Striking a balance between our own deeply held convictions, on the one hand, and our respect for the wise old Presbyterian principle of the freedom of individual consciences before God, on the other, is a multi-layered and complex task, so surely mistakes have been and will continue to be made. The old adage, however, that the preacher's task, indeed the church's task, is to comfort the troubled and to trouble the comfortable, is still true, even if we preachers do not always perform such tasks with consummate skill.

But of this much I am absolutely certain and say without equivocation: that our first loyalty is to Christ and to His reign... that His is a reign that reaches out to feed people's physical hunger as well as their spiritual hunger... that His is a reign that seeks to extend not only mercy, but justice... that His is a reign that gives more than lip service to the needs of the poor and the dispossessed... that His is a reign that speaks forcefully to principalities and powers as well as to individuals... and that as His disciples, *we* are called to do the same... to pray and to work and to spread the Word, toward the end that Christ's Kingdom will come *on earth* as it is in heaven. Our ongoing support of elected officials is predicated upon their commitment to such kingdom values.

For all the arguments about whether evangelicals, Catholics, or mainline Protestants have the corner on the Christian voice in our time, or which party has the

more faithful policies, here is the Gospel truth, friends. Republicans and Democrats alike, indeed this nation as a whole, are not even close to embodying God's realm in our time, whether one measures by the plumb-line of Jeremiah or by the humble humanity of Jesus Christ. We're not even close. There are still so many closed doors that must be opened, and we seem driven to nail them shut. There are still so many injustices that must be set right, and we don't want to be bothered. There are still so many hearts hardened by hatred and prejudice that need to be touched by love and tenderness. There are still so many times we choose to act on fear instead of faith. There is still so much self-centered greed and suspicion of others that needs to be confronted and transformed into generosity and into a commitment to the common good. There is still far too much arrogance and self-righteousness in this land, metastasizing like a cancer in our national bloodstream. We're not even close to the reign of God.

What's hard to figure is whether we even know it or sense it. For all the voiced religious pronouncements of our time, we certainly don't model much grace and generosity or gratitude in this world. I don't think many in this land have a clue or even care about what Jesus would have us do or say. All through this lectionary year Luke's Gospel has laid before us the demands of Christ vis-à-vis the poor and the downtrodden, has warned us about the blindness of arrogance and greed, and yet, in a sense, we in this nation are still arguing about who is most suited to sit at Jesus' right hand, and who at his left in the Kingdom.

But here, in this morning's Gospel, we finally see who it is that is at his right and his left... not the Republicans or the Democrats, but two Palestinian criminals... two run-of-the-mill sinners... with whom many people, maybe even some of us, would not even think of associating. Now, one of them, even as he dies, can think only of himself. He lashes out at Jesus without a hint of understanding. He doesn't have a clue as to the real possibilities of that moment. But the other one gets it... he really gets it... understands exactly who is at the center of that scene, and what the promise and potential of His reign really is in both its power and its tenderness... and he entrusts himself fully to that promise. And Jesus promises to remember him.

Several mornings this week I woke with that scene in my head; and as I looked in the mirror, I tried to figure out which of those two I most resemble. In these days of stress and angry disagreement, am I more the trusting one, willing to forsake my will for the sake of His? Or am I the bitter one, who can only express angry cynicism at where we find ourselves? I was wrestling with that question ... until I realized that it was really the *wrong* question. The better question, I believe, is this one: which one of the two do I *want* to be? Or, which one of the two will I *choose* to be? Whose reign will I trust? To whose kingdom do I want to belong?

Now, what about you? On this Sunday of the reign of Christ, where is *your* allegiance? Whose kingdom will *you* choose? Whose reign will *you* serve?