

The Last Sunday after Pentecost Year C
The Feast of Christ the King
November 20, 2022

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
LUKE 23:33-43

CHRIST THE KING

What is true power? And what is power *for*?

The United States, Brazil and Israel have just finished election seasons in which widely varying visions for the use of power in each country were put forth, culminating in vigorously contested and close elections.

Christians are called to be involved in the social realm, where policies are decided which have enormous consequences for the well-being of humanity, for the rest of God's creatures on Earth, and for God's Creation here itself. Thoughtful Christians can differ as to which policies are best. But for all Christians, the rulers of this world are, though important, only of *secondary* importance. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords is Jesus Christ. To him alone belongs ultimate supremacy.

The great Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, from whom we just heard, spoke and wrote in a calamitous time for the people of Judah, the one remaining Israelite kingdom in the 7th Century B.C. No humble, wise and inspired kings rose to meet the challenges God's people faced in those times. There were, rather, those who Jeremiah calls the unfaithful "shepherds" whose "evil deeds" Jeremiah calls out in today's passage, at great risk to his own personal safety.

But Jeremiah does more than denounce: he lifts up for his people a vision of the ultimate great and good king to be raised up by God, who "shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." This king, Jeremiah declares, will even make the northern kingdom of Israel — destroyed by invaders a century before his time — "live in safety." Such a king as described by Jeremiah was way beyond that of any merely mortal descendent of King David.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," announces the psalmist. Again, mortal leaders can and should do good things, but the *ultimate* refuge and strength for people is God alone. It is this psalm which is the basis for the text of the great hymn, "A mighty fortress is our God."

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul declares that God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son."

We all have two “citizenships”: one of a country on this Earth, and one in the Kingdom of God, to which belongs our *primary* allegiance. Whenever things seem to be falling apart, Paul reassures us, “in Christ all things hold together.”

So this is The Big Picture, the “view from 30,000 feet” as it were which we get from St. Paul, Jeremiah and the psalmist. We now know and believe in Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords — cue the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah” here.

How was Jesus’ supreme kingship first manifested ?

Jesus’ supreme kingship was first manifested to the world, as today’s Gospel tells us, “When they came to the place which is called the Skull” where he was crucified. Biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmeyer writes, “The inscription on the cross is the only thing we know of which was *written about* Jesus during his lifetime.” The Gospel says, “There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’”

The First Century Jewish historian Josephus called crucifixion “the most pitiable of deaths.” The great Roman leader Cicero described it as “the worst extreme of tortures inflicted on slaves.” The purpose of Romans executing people in this grisly and slow way — those crucified usually died only after long suffering and when they could no longer breathe — was to show all onlookers “We’re the Empire and you’re not.”

Crucifixion was preceded by brutal whipping, then being paraded through the streets of the city as an object of derision, then being stripped to one’s underwear so as to make the punishment as humiliating as possible, then to be both nailed and tied to a cross and subject to the merciless heat of summer, or the sleet of winter, perhaps insects and rats as well, with no control over one’s bodily functions and with the taunts (and maybe more) of passers-by. Then the crucified person’s dead body was typically dumped on a garbage heap to be food for vultures and vermin. Only Joseph of Arimathea saved Jesus’ body from that fate.

When I was Interim Rector of St. Mark’s, Plainfield, the largest all-Black church in our diocese, we celebrated Holy Cross Day, September 14, with an intimate, mid-week Eucharist attended by about 20 people. For my homily, I stood by the Stations of the Cross and described crucifixion much as I have just done and then, as was our custom at Wednesday services, opened the floor for reflections by those lay people in attendance.

One worshipper raised her hand, pointed to the Stations of the Cross, and said, “This reminds me of my grandfather. [Pause.] He was lynched.”

Such was Jesus’ first throne: the cross.

The Romans put an inscription on a plaque over the head of the crucified person with his name and the charge on which he had been convicted and sentenced. Jesus was convicted by the Romans of claiming to be the King of the Jews, and thus the would-be leader of a revolt against Roman rule in the Holy Land.

If you ever hear someone say, “The Church should not be involved in politics,” well, it’s a little late to say that. Jesus was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, a politician, on a *political* charge which carried the death penalty.

The King of Kings and Lord of Lords was lifted up to the world upon an instrument of torture. The most powerful empire of its day labelled Jesus derisively as “the King of the Jews,” a way of saying, “This is the way we Romans treat anyone who tries to be your king in place of the Emperor. Jews, don’t get any more ideas.”

No wonder St. Paul wrote that God has “rescued us from the power of *darkness*” — the earthly powers represented by an empire that claimed to be led by a divine emperor and tortured people to remain in power. WE are no longer under “the power of darkness” except in limited and short-term ways, we have been “transferred into the Kingdom of God’s beloved Son,” who *accepted* torture in order to liberate us. That’s what true power is, and what it is for.

What is this Kingdom of God like? Jesus preached about it a lot. But here, in today’s Gospel, Jesus is hanging on his excruciating throne and immediately reveals two crucial parts of the Kingdom of God in his anguished words from the cross: **forgiveness** and **salvation**.

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus asks God to forgive his *torturers and executioners*. That, folks, is the “Olympic Gold Medal” in forgiveness. WE are called by Jesus to forgive others ourselves “as we have been forgiven.” Jesus “walked the walk” of forgiveness even when he could no longer actually walk.

And then Jesus said to the penitent thief, gasping for air and slowly speaking to him from an adjacent cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Think it’s only the perpetual goody-goodies who can be saved? Jesus allows people to take “U-turns” with their lives. Even at the *very* last minute. There is hope for *all*.

Forgiveness and salvation are two of the great “jewels” on the Crown of Thorns on our Savior’s brow. Thanks be to God.

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