

Last Pentecost, Proper 29, Yr. C
Christ the King Sunday
November 20, 2016
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

Today is the last Sunday of the church year and it's also Christ the King Sunday, the day in which we remind ourselves that the kingdom, the power and the glory are God's now and forever. It's a day, then, in which we properly ask ourselves what God and life and the world are all about. Those are basic questions, but today's celebration poses more, like: what does it mean to say that Christ is the King? And, if Christ really IS the King of all creation, what should that creation and our world look like? And then, how does that matter to me? How does it touch my life? What difference does it all make to me, here in Sister Bay, Wisconsin?

The Jeremiah reading and the Gospel are about kingship, about leadership, and about the nature of power. All fitting subjects for us to think about at this time in our country's history. Some context helps to understand the Jeremiah reading. This is being written after 587 when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians and the leadership and many of the people were taken off into exile. Jeremiah had warned against the King's decision to rebel against the Babylonian empire, but his voice had been drowned out by other voices – voices who told the king what he wanted to hear and thereby encouraged him to make decisions that led to disaster. And those voices, by their careless counsel, saying, "don't worry, disaster won't befall us" encouraged headstrong, foolhardy policies, which did indeed lead to disaster. So Jeremiah's writing this morning is about leadership – leaders are to be like shepherds, trustworthy and responsible, having not their own interests, but the interests of their people in mind. We talked last week about the centrality of righteousness, which meant that everyone was in right relationship, first with God and then with everyone else. Jeremiah is saying that God will indeed raise up a righteous king. The job of the shepherd/king, the righteous king, is to lead people in God's ways: to use the words of another prophet, Micah, to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. That's the standard against which kings and other leaders are to be judged.

So, given that, what are we saying when we say that Christ is the King? We're saying that God is ultimately in charge – that God's kingdom will come. I'd like to point out something here. And that is that, especially in Matthew, what's correctly translated as Kingdom of GOD is often translated as Kingdom of HEAVEN. And theologians point out that that has led to some confusion. When we use "heaven" language it's possible to think of a place, definitely other than HERE, where everything will be OK. I remember when I was little, thinking that heaven must be a marvelous place where one sat around all day reading favorite books and eating hot fudge sundaes and maybe occasionally playing a harp – not too sure about that last one! But that emphasis on heaven as someplace else has led many Christians to think that the primary goal is to "go to heaven after I die" – that's very different from the idea of the Kingdom of GOD which is about what the world would look like if God was completely running the show. After last week's sermon, someone came up to me and said that he thought God probably was regretting giving us free will. And, yes, I'm sure there are times when he does – it shows amazing trust in us, however, trust that we'll use that free will to love God and one another and

to work towards the kind of world God envisions. N.T. Wright, the Anglican bishop and theologian, has written extensively about Christians' confusion about this. He reminds us that we're to be creating God's kingdom HERE and NOW – in THIS world. He laments that too many Christians are so focused on the next world that they are, as he puts it, of no earthly use at all. Another part of the confusion comes from the fact that we're told that we are citizens of heaven. We are, of course, but what that means is that we have a vision that is meant to inform how we live now. The temptation may be to think that we can just wait it out and that, in the end, God will show up and put everything to rights. That temptation to sit back and just let God do it reminds me of my recent surgery when I was having a pleasant chat with the anesthesiologist – I had met him before, under different circumstances and liked him. He made some remark about hoping that I'd still like him after the surgery and then went on to say that for about three hours after the surgery I'd feel like just pulling the blankets over my head and hoping the world would go away. I think that's somewhat what the temptation to just forget our responsibility in the world may be like – pull up the blankets and forget the whole thing. That may indeed be tempting, but that's not our call – that's not what we signed on to as Christians.

Instead, we're called to faith and to follow Jesus – in discipleship, in prayer, holiness, hope and love. In doing that, we grow into those images of God that we talked about last week. As Wright puts it, we become ICONS, a kind of example and foretaste of what God wants all of us to be AND, there's more – we become part of the means by which God makes God's Kingdom happen, both now and in the future. So we're to be agents of transformation of THIS earth, this creation until, finally, we will arrive at God's desire, that situation when as Isaiah put it, THE EARTH IS FULL OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD AS WATERS COVER THE SEA. This kingdom of God's was inaugurated at the Resurrection with the defeat of evil, sin and death. It's the beginning of that time in which God will eventually set all creation right and all the chaos created by sinful human beings will become order and fruitfulness. Jesus talked about that kingdom over and over in his ministry – he talked about the free love and forgiveness offered to the prodigal son, he talked about the shepherd who'd leave the 99 sheep to go in search of the lost one, he talked about that heavenly banquet where all would be included.

This morning's Gospel, which is usually heard during Holy Week, is Jesus showing us how to live in God's kingdom. In these final hours, Jesus is being tempted – he's being challenged to come down off the cross and do what everyone wanted him to do as the purported Messiah – those taunts of save yourself – don't you think there's a subtext there – and SAVE us too. Save us. You probably know that the name "Jesus" means God saves his people. So, in the midst of pride and arrogance and hatred and cruelty, in the abuse of power that the world knows so well, there's that taunt that could be read as a plea: save yourself and prove to us that you are who you say you are.... If you're listening carefully, you can hear echoes of that first temptation in the desert. Remember when right after his baptism, the text told us that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan? And you'll remember the temptations – they were really all about power there, too. Turn these stones into bread, throw yourself off the temple and, finally, I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you'll fall down and worship me. And don't you think that if you were Jesus, suffering a death that the Romans had cruelly devised to stamp out any hint of dissent, you'd have been tempted to have those armies of angels charging in, rescuing you and cleaning up the mess and confusion once and for all? Of

maybe, with less flash and drama, maybe Jesus would just get down from the cross? But if you think about it, that would have meant that the ways of the world, the world's understanding of power as might making right, would have remained in place. All would have been business as usual because for the rest of us, Jesus coming down from the cross would have meant a number of things. First of all no resurrection. And if no resurrection, no overcoming the death and sin and evil that we all have to face. And it would have confirmed the world's understanding of power – that God's coercive power was mightier than that wielded by the Romans – but then the essential truth, that LOVE was God's way and the love was more powerful than might or than death – none of that would have been demonstrated. So we don't have armies or demonstrations of might; instead we have, amazingly, words of forgiveness and of welcome to the sinning thief – no condemnation, no revenge, just love. One last thought about this – about who Jesus was and who we are called to be. When he came out of the desert, having survived those temptations, he laid out his ministry in Nazareth – I'm anointed, he said, to bring sight to the blind, to set prisoners free, to preach good news to the poor. A refusal to grab power and an acceptance of love and service instead.

To accomplish what we've been called to do, we need God and we need each other. Getting close to Christmas, I'm reminded of a children's sermon that JD did at Transfiguration. He got a string of lights and gave each child one of them. His intent was to plug the string into the power source, i.e., all the power comes from God, the source, and then have them all hold their bulbs while he took his out so that the whole string would go out, showing how everyone's presence was necessary to the community. He didn't reckon with what would happen when he gave them each a bulb, however – each of them was busy taking out and putting in their bulbs – the sermon was funny but his point was, I'm sure, lost.

But the point that we need God and each other was the subject of a story Bishop told about Dorotheos of Gaza. It had to do with how Christians are to live. The image was that of a wheel, with all of us on the circumference and God in the center. At the far edge of the wheel, we're all a bit apart, but as we move closer to the center, closer to God, we also get closer to one another. That's our challenge to follow Jesus' way in loving one another, in patience, gentleness, humility and reverence. If we can do that, as Christians, we will be agents of God's transformation in the world. Amen.