

Last Pentecost, Yr. C

November 24, 2019

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

This is Christ the King Sunday and the theme for this morning's scriptures is set out in the Collect. Christ as King of kings and Lord of Lords – what's he going to do? How is he going to exercise that power? He's going to restore all things, he's going to use his power to free all the people of the earth, all of us who are now divided and enslaved by sin, bringing us all together under his most gracious rule. Power, what it is and how we use it, is the focus. Friday was my grandson Joe's 20th birthday. I sent him a card, which I hope didn't embarrass him, which showed a young boy of about seven standing in a superman cape in a power pose. Inside the card it said, here's hoping you'll use all your power for good. Actually, there's the sermon right there!

I remember a book by Rabbi Michael Lerner titled, *The Left Hand of God*. In it, he argues that the world and believers really are used to, and perhaps prefer, the power of God's right hand, the one he uses to smite his enemies. We like the image of God as an all-powerful avenger who will overthrow evil, exterminate our enemies and coerce people into goodness. That last bit, about coercing people into goodness, is impossible when you think about it. It's a bit like forcing a 2-year old into some desired behavior. As long as you're there watching, the correct behavior may indeed follow, but because the need for that behavior hasn't been internalized, the minute you turn your back, it's back to business as usual. By definition, goodness can't be forced. But I think the good Rabbi may be right – that we might well prefer that kind of coercive power. I remember many Saturday afternoons at the movies, usually cowboy movies back then, when the hero rode in in the nick of time so that, once again, the good guys could defeat the bad guys. Isn't that our usual idea of power?

Skipping ahead to the Gospel, that's clearly the understanding of power at play. First there's Pilate's conversation with Jesus: YOU? A king? Give me a break. Look here: I have the purple robes, the guards, the army, the

might of Rome. And you? You'll note, as you stand there bruised and bloody, that no one is coming to rescue you or even to speak up for you. Get real! Hence the ironic sign on the cross: "This is the King of the Jews."

That same idea of power shows up in the comments from the leaders and the soldiers: IF YOU ARE THE KING OF THE JEWS, SAVE YOURSELF. And then, maybe even more tellingly, the comment from the one criminal: ARE YOU NOT THE MESSIAH? SAVE YOURSELF AND US! There are a couple of things to be noted here. First of all, these comments are a reflection of those temptations in the desert that Jesus suffered way back at the beginning of his ministry. Remember those? Remember that after he's been told he's the beloved son of God and goes into the desert, Satan shows up and his questions are all about how the power that comes with being the beloved son is going to be exercised: Son of God, huh? OK – I know you're hungry; turn these stones into bread. Use your power in your own self interest. Or again, IF you are the son of God, prove it. Do something really spectacular, throw yourself off the temple. God will save you. Dazzle us; convince us! Once again, it's a question of using that power in one's own self-interest. And then, finally, LOOK, HERE ARE ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD. THEY ARE YOURS FOR THE TAKING IF YOU JUST WORSHIP ME. Power again, but here with the price tag clearly attached. Worship ME, Satan says. The power is yours: use it for your own needs, your own desires, your own glorification. All you have to do is sell your soul.

This appears to be a perennial problem, somehow woven into our makeup. Perhaps, as I've speculated before, it has to do with the recognition of our frailty and, therefore, our need for safety. We see that need for safety and for someone to save us in those taunts and questions at the crucifixion: SAVE YOURSELF AND US. We've talked before about the expectation that the Messiah, the savior, would be someone who would be a military champion, someone wielding that right hand of power, someone who'd exterminate all Israel's enemies. SAVE us meant GET DOWN FROM THE CROSS AND BLAST THE ROMANS TO KINGDOM COME. But, if you think about it, what would that have meant? It would have meant that the world's definition of power was the right one; that it really was that might

made right; that coercion and force were the answers to all our problems. But Jesus has another vision – a vision of a different kind of power, the power of love and forgiveness and compassion. That vision was so unheard of, so unexpected, that people didn't recognize Jesus as someone who was saving them. You'll remember that even John the Baptist questioned Jesus. John had baptized Jesus and pointed him out as the Lamb of God. But when John was imprisoned by Herod, he sent disciples to ask Jesus: ARE YOU THE ONE? REALLY? OR DO WE HAVE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER? And you'll remember that Jesus answered that question, not in terms of hard power, but by saying, GO BACK AND TELL JOHN WHAT YOU'VE SEEN – the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news preached to them.

So the kinds of power and which kind we prefer is one question here. Where we're ultimately headed is another. In the Colossians reading, Paul is setting out a cosmic vision and it's a vision of unity through Christ – the one through whom all was created, the one who is holding all things together. The one who is reconciling all things, bringing us back to peace and that original unity. That's the kingdom we're living in Paul tells us. We've already been transferred to that kingdom. But Jeremiah points out that the wrong leadership can destroy that unity and leave people fearful, scattered and dismayed. We're meant for that Kingdom of God where peace and unity reign. How do we get there?

Some of you may have heard of Dwight Moody who was a 19th century American evangelist. He's quoted in one sermon as bringing up the question of not only leadership but of our role in selecting that leadership. He's nonpartisan in his opinion. He says:

"If the question could be put to a popular vote, I do not believe a single state would vote for the coming of Jesus to reign here as he reigns in heaven. I do not believe a single country, city, ward in this city or a single precinct in this country would vote for his coming...the Republican party would vote for the biggest blackguard on the earth rather than for him. The Democrats would vote solidly against him. Even the Prohibitionists

wouldn't want him here. I see some of you shaking your heads. Well, shake 'em. I'm talking facts." (Synthesis 2010) What do you think? Would you vote for Jesus? If Jesus was running things, if the Kingdom really was fully here, what would that look like? You may remember my story from last week about the homeless shelter when someone asked WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS ANYWAY and someone else responded, the good news is that it doesn't have to be this way.

However we answer the question about what would have to change, we know that hate, coercion, destruction – none of those would be in the picture. George Kennan, a statesman during the Cold War, said this:

"There can be no genuine stability in any system which is based on the evil and weakness in humankind's nature... which attempts to live by humankind's degradation, feeding like a vulture on (our) anxieties, (our) capacity for hatred, (our) susceptibility to error, (our) vulnerability to psychological manipulation."

Is it too farfetched to think that in this nuclear age, when humans have the power of destruction at their fingertips that Jesus' way is the ONLY way? His way is totally different. This is the one who redefined power, the one who said I HAVE COME TO SERVE, NOT TO BE SERVED. Power yes, but power for service and power for good.

This is all well and good, but how do we translate this into our daily lives? Some friends of mine who live in Ohio sent me their Bishop's convention address. And he talks about exactly that – about how when he travels around he hears alarm, despair, anxiety and anger. And he quotes the PB:

"The US is being torn asunder within by the inability to be in deep relationship with each other and yet hold differing positions and convictions. And the test of this democratic experience will be the capacity of this particular nation to hold differences in the context of deep and real human relationships. " And where, he wonders, is the church in all of this? What can a Christian do? He concludes, as do Paul and the author of our collect, that we're called to work for that peace and unity, to remember, even in the midst of deep discord, that each of us is loved by God and that

to love one another means to remember that we are connected. That we are diverse: we may see life differently, we come from different experiences that have formed us, some valuing order and stability, some thinking that liberty is most important, some of the opinion that care for all is the supreme virtue. But key to our vocations as Christians, he says, is to remember that we're all loved, we're all needed to complete God's community, we're all valued, we all have a voice in the conversations that will decide our fate as a nation and move us closer to the vision God has of the Kingdom. Challenging? Yes. Necessary? Yes.

Ultimately why we're here? Yes. Amen

