

Sunday, November 20, 2022

Christ the King (Year C)

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Luke 23.33-43

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/844574623362089>

(Sermon begins at about 18:45)

“Dual Citizenship”

I know it happens every two years, like clockwork, that the feast of Christ the King falls a mere couple of weeks after our general elections in early November. But to be honest, I have never particularly thought about it before. The elections come and go, we move on, and a few weeks later we celebrate the last Sunday after Pentecost, the feast of Christ the King. But this year, it somehow seems more poignant. Perhaps because, in some ways, the election continues, with a few House races and many local races still up in the air. And as we await the final outcome of those races, of those final decisions about our earthly governance, we also celebrate on this day, governance of a different sort. For us Christians, a governance that is more important—or at least, should be—than any decisions about mayoral or gubernatorial races, about who controls the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Not to diminish the importance of our national and local elections. They do have their place. Through our election process, we have collectively chosen those who, at least theoretically, will govern in our name and on our behalf. Those names that have become known to us through the campaign season. Names elevated to prominence through the will of the majority on November 8th. But today, we recognize that regardless of who is elected, we as God’s faithful, are subject to, as the Apostle Paul tells the Philippian church, “the name that is above every name”: Jesus Christ.

Being subject to both the rule of both earthly authorities and divine authority is the subject of our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, which provides an oracle to the people of Judah in the sixth century BC that is equally timely for the people of God in 21st century America. The oracle as originally written concerns the return of the people from the Babylonian Exile. Jeremiah says, “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.”

An indictment against the kings and civic leaders of Judah who are to blame for the scattering of God’s people into exile. That it is the leaders of Judah who, through corruption, through self-centered and self-serving actions, through failure to uphold the foundational principles of justice and righteousness, resulted in a nation that was weakened politically and economically. Resulted in divisions among the people. Resulted in uncertainty as to the future of the nation and the wellbeing of its people. Resulting in conditions that were ripe for others to seek to manipulate and control not only the government but the lives of the people.

Sound familiar? Jeremiah's oracle is an indictment against the earthly rulers of his time. An indictment that could, in many ways, be levied against the earthly rulers of our own time. Of our own nation. "Thus says the LORD . . . 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." That our elected officials are more concerned with their own wellbeing as opposed to the wellbeing of the people they are elected to serve. Resulting in not only divisions in Congress, but also divisions on the streets of our cities, even in our own homes.

While the argument could be made that there are similarities between the political, economic, and social conditions of ancient Judah and contemporary America, the ultimate outcomes are, to date, different. Judah was conquered and made a vassal state of the Babylonian Empire. The leadership and upper echelon of society—the movers and shakers—were forcibly removed and taken into exile in a foreign land. Our government has not been dismantled, our social structures have not been destroyed, and we have not been carried into exile by a foreign power. But there may be some metaphorical parallels. That we face the danger of being taken down a path contrary to the principles envisioned and established by our Founding Fathers and enshrined in such documents as the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Some political analysts have questioned whether we might not be witnessing and living through the beginning of the end of American democracy. As to that, only time will tell.

God's response and corrective to the failed leadership of Judah is that he will return the people to their homeland, where they will flourish. And to ensure that they will indeed thrive and prosper, God promises, "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." Jeremiah further expounds on this promise: "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 . . . And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" In hindsight, we are able to see that the shepherd who is promised, the righteous Branch who will lead the people back into the ways of justice and righteousness, is Jesus. The one we hail as Christ the King.

Just as Jeremiah's oracle against the leaders of Judah have some applicability to the leaders of the United States—and a number of other nations, as well—so too does God's response and corrective have applicability to us 2,600 years later. That the corrective to the challenges we face in our own nation and our own time is a shepherd who will lead the people back into the ways of justice and righteousness—of right and faithful living. And that is the one we celebrate today in the image of Christ the King. The image of a different kind of king. The image of a king that is unlike any other earthly ruler the world has ever known. The image that is portrayed in our Gospel reading from Luke.

Our Gospel reading obviously portrays the well-known scene of Jesus' crucifixion. A seemingly odd choice for the image of a king of any sort. An image that is so counterintuitive, so different from what we see in virtually all our earthly leaders past or present. Because we have an image of our leaders and rulers as being powerful—or at least they should be as such. And yet Jesus being nailed to a cross is the complete opposite. It is an image of being powerless. Which was the whole purpose of crucifixion. It was a means of execution meant to humiliate the one

condemned, showing their absolute powerlessness, and to intimidate the population to deter such figures from stepping forward in the future. All as a means of projecting—and protecting—Roman imperial power.

That's the whole reason Jesus was executed on a cross in the first place. To protect and preserve the power and authority of the temple. To protect and preserve the power and authority of the Roman Empire. Because Jesus' message, his very being, was the antithesis, the polar opposite, to what the temple authorities and the Roman occupation represented. Namely self-serving power exercised and perpetuated through the oppression of the masses. Self-serving power characterized by corruption, injustice, and a disregard for the well-being of the people. And the people saw that. They heard Jesus' teachings. They witnessed his acts of love and compassion, of nurturing and healing. They saw that what Jesus offered was a different way of being. A way of life governed not by the capricious whims of mortals but by the fair and unwavering laws of God. As Jesus' popularity grew, he became more and more a threat to earthly powers. The reign of God threatening the reign of man.

It was the reign of man—the temple authorities, the Roman Empire—that put Jesus on the cross. Seeking to silence him and the truth he proclaimed. The truth that there is a better way. God's way. A way of love, a way of welcome, a way of inclusivity, a way of mercy and compassion. A way, as the Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, of justice and righteousness. All embodied in the one who hung on a cross. The one whom the temple leaders mocked, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The one whom the Roman soldiers mocked, saying "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

Jesus chose not to save himself. That's not the kind of messiah he was. The kind of messiah he is. Instead, when asked by one of the criminals crucified alongside him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," Jesus responded by saying, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Recognition that, yes, he would die this day. That he would not save himself. Rather than saving himself, he chose to sacrifice himself instead. So that he could save a couple of convicted criminals. So that he could save countless others, even those who mocked him, who put him on that cross. So that he could save you and me. This is what Jesus accomplished through his death on the cross. The salvation of humanity. Something neither the temple authorities nor the Roman occupation nor any earthly authority could possibly accomplish. Only the one who is our true King could do that.

Of course, the reality is that we live in a world that is governed by human authorities. That is just how it is going to be until God decides to bring about the end times and fully institute the reign and Kingdom of God. As people of God, as the Body of Christ, we therefore have dual citizenship. We are citizens of God's Kingdom, with Christ as our King. And we are citizens of our earthly nation—in our case, of the United States. Which means we need to live within that dual system. We, of course, recognize that our allegiance to God takes priority over allegiance to earthly powers and authority. As much as we might want to turn our backs on systems of earthly governance and the accompanying petty, self-centered politics, we cannot. As people of God, we are called to have a foot in both realms. We are called to be active in both realms. We are called to do what we can to interject more of God's realm into the earthly realm. We do this

through engaging in the political process. Doing so in a way that is informed by the values and example of our true ruler.

The people of first century Israel did not have a choice. They had their leaders forced upon them. We have a choice. We get to elect our own leaders. And we have another choice—or rather, an opportunity—that they did not have. We have the opportunity to also follow another leader, another king. One who truly cares for us. One who truly embodies our values and priorities. One who truly represents us as children of God. One who can be a model for true leadership. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, we have the opportunity, we have the responsibility, to boldly live the values of that Kingdom as a means of helping transform and redeem the earthly realm of which we are also a part. Helping to bring it one step closer to the vision embodied by our one true leader, Christ the King.