

Christ the King / The Reign of Christ  
Year C - 24/11/2019

Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Psalm: Song of Zechariah  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33-43

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Today is a day when you are asked to turn an idea upside down - to firmly take the word "king" and stand it on its head. Christ our King, the monarch, is that humble, compassionate person who

never held any public office,  
never had friends in high places,  
never travelled out of his tiny country,  
never met anyone more important than a provincial governor.

His only crown - a wreath of thorns.

His only throne - two crossed planks of wood.

At his right hand, and at his left, two dying thieves.

This is, in all ways, an image of kingship which we do not find easy to understand; this is not an image of power and authority which seems to make any sense to us.

And yet, on this significant feast in the life of the church, it is how we are to understand something of the ministry of Christ and of the reign of Christ. So, what do we make of the image and idea of a king like this?

Firstly, we need to put aside all our traditional ideas and notions of an earthly king. Even in Australia, which has never really had an active idea of the monarchy, at least not in most of our experience, we are still transfixed by an image of a king who wields power, who holds ultimate authority, whose commands and decrees are followed simply because of the position of a monarch. This stands apposite to the reign of Christ.

Secondly, it is necessary, I think, to broaden our minds and understand the role of a king as somehow existing for something more than the role itself - a notion of selflessness within a role of authority. Maybe it is just my somewhat cynical mind, but I can't help but think that so much of the time in our society people in positions of authority are more worried about feathering their own nests than harboring a concern for their constituents, or the people who are affected by their policies.

The image of kingship displayed in the person of Jesus Christ consistently challenges that idea - because Jesus existed solely for others - the actions of Jesus are only fully understood by the ways in which his life touched others; healing, blessing, saving, redeeming actions, full of life... for others.

This morning's Gospel portrays 2 responses to that life of salvation; those who did not understand it and so were threatened by it; and the one who caught a glimpse of the person of God.

It is in the mocking words of the scoffers—the leaders (v. 35), the soldiers (vs. 36-37), and an unrepentant criminal (v. 39)—and in the inscription put over the cross (v. 38) that readers are faced with the true nature of Jesus' Kingship.

On the one hand, the repeated demand, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" functions as yet another temptation for Jesus. Jesus is being invited to save himself, to avoid the cross, and in the process to save the criminals as well.

He is being tempted to choose another vocation, to be a different sort of King from his distinctive calling, perhaps a political figure. By his lack of response to those who taunt him, however, Jesus clearly remains steadfast in fulfilling the divine will.

One criminal, we are told, "kept deriding him" and joined the group of scoffers. But the other criminal hears in the words something more and different—the words of a King, whose authority is like no other, who prays for those who spitefully abuse and persecute him, who seeks forgiveness for them on their behalf.

This criminal seeks a place for himself in a realm where the key message is pardon and not recompense, where condemned criminals can be fully restored. And in his response, he becomes an exemplar to us in our life of faith.

It was the life of faith of another man, blessed Gerard of Jerusalem which was the basis, in the year 1098, of the Order which we welcome and celebrate today. It was Gerard who founded a hospital to care for those with leprosy; the hospital was dedicated to St. Lazarus, and the Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem was born.

Its members are committed in their lives to act with strength, simplicity and charity in a manner that embodies the Christian spirit that has enlivened the Order for so long. The Order has as its objective that members serve to alleviate the plight of the sick and poor, whether they suffer a deficiency in spiritual or physical health, or a poverty of means to live with dignity.

In witnessing to Christ the King, reaching out in love and service to those in need, the Order seeks to be an expression of the human spirit, bringing its members closer to the true essence of God. The activities of the Order attempt to bring its members towards this state of grace through application of charitable giving and hands-on charitable activities. Indeed, many hundreds of thousands of dollars are raised by the Order each year, and we give thanks to God for their witness.

The church year is drawing to a close. Indeed, we begin a new year next week with the dawning of the season of Advent. On this day we, as a faith community cannot help reflecting back on the past—both our own past and all human past. The monuments to sin and error lie strewn across the landscape for all to see, reminders that even the very best human efforts (to say nothing of the worst human efforts!) often lead to disillusion and despair. Where is one to turn for hope? for grace?

The readings of this day stand as witness that those qualities come from God. It is the Lord's gracious intervention in our lives that saves us from ourselves, from all the havoc we impose on our own lives and happiness.

This is the message contained within much of Scripture, from the Hebrew Scriptures, characterized by the voice of the Prophets, to John the Baptist's cry for repentance, to the saving acts of Jesus Christ. Although the contexts and the language employed change from one example to the next, our readings today address the ends served by divine power.

Jeremiah begins by castigating the "shepherds" of the people who have used their power to scatter the flock rather than to protect it.

By contrast, God will gather the remnant of the flock and will send a "righteous Branch," whose kingship will be characterized by wisdom, justice, and safety. The exercise of kingly power, then, is on behalf of God's people rather than over against them.

And just as no flesh-and-blood Davidic king ever realized the grand promises vested by God in that royal house, so we all fail to be what God designed us to be, what God longs for us to be. Jesus Christ, however, is the one king who did realize the promises of the Lord. Jesus Christ is the one human life that lived out its full potential.

So, then, the church looks forward to Advent as the sign of God's loving intervention into human life, that gracious intervention which alone has the power to save us. Our anticipation begins again to rise, and we sense that soon, very soon, God's promises will be renewed.

In this way we reiterate the experience of those so long ago who yearned for the birth of the Messiah. We also—in and for ourselves—yearn for the completion of God's grace, for the Second Advent which was both promised, and which is enacted for us by Christ, our King.

In the name of God, Amen.