

Sermon 2016-11-20
St. Stephen's, Laurelhurst
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Christ the King

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 23:1-6

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. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 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, says the Lord.

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. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Sermon

God made Donald Trump, just as God made Barrack Obama.

That's not to say either one of them is perfect.

Rather, it puts things in perspective.

Rarely, I think, has the last Sunday before Advent fallen at a more fitting time
in US culture.

I usually have a hard time explaining to congregations why it is so important
to spend one Sunday every year

remembering that Christ is King,

or in the familiar language:

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign for ever and ever.

We're not that familiar with Kings

at least we don't think of them as heads of government,

Elizabeth the Second,

by the Grace of God, Queen of Great Britain, Ireland

and the British Dominions beyond the Seas Queen, Defender of the Faith

doesn't handle the daily details of managing a nation.

Technically, she is a head of State (a symbolic leader), but not a head of government.

Both are important, but I want to talk about heads of government today.

The head of government – a president or a prime minister

runs the daily affairs of a country as the chief executive,

head of the military

head of the police.

They make things happen.

Herod the Great, Emperor Augustus, and Rameses II were heads of government.

So were David and Solomon and Nebuchadnezzar.

They exercised power daily.

People went to them, often daily, for justice and mercy.

And, because they had so much power over people's lives,

there was a tendency to worship them.

Worship – “worth ship” – worthiness.

This was not just a matter of ego – though ego could easily get involved –

it was a recognition that the ruler could solve your problems,

or make your life miserable.

Kings and Emperors were focal points for power and,

at least in the Greek speaking world,

people would yell out “*Kyrie eleison*,” Lord, have mercy on me,

or, perhaps more accurately, Lord, hear my cry and look with favor on my request.

There might be hundreds of people and only one King.

You needed to get his attention.

Lord! Over here! Deal with my issue!

Christians have generally been fans of kings and heads of government.
 They are an efficient way to get things done.
 On a daily basis, you need someone to keep the government running,
 to keep an eye on the military
 and the police
 and the roads
 and communication
 and on and on.

Christians have not been fans of worshiping Earthly rulers.
 We think that they can solve some of our problems, but not all of them.
 They are worthy of respect, but there is always a higher power.
 We call it idolatry when people get confused about
 where our ultimate good can be found.
 No matter how much power an Earthly leader has,
 they cannot bring us the kind of love and joy that God can.
 So we value heads of government,
 but we don't worship them.

We also recognize that Earthly leaders often get things
 horribly, horribly wrong.
 At the end of the day, someone judges the King,
 just as the King judges the people.
 As we say in the Lord's prayer,
 Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,
 so Kings and Presidents will be judged with the same mercy they use to judge
 others.
 That is particularly true here in the US, where the people elect the leaders.
 We have power, which means we also have responsibility for how it is used.

I found the election profoundly troubling.
 I don't like the way we treated one another as leaders and voters.
 I don't like the disregard for the truth.
 I don't like that many things I want to see done will not be done.
 So I find myself crying out to God, "Kyrie, eleison."
 "Lord, hear my cry and look with favor on my request"
 "Lord, have mercy on me."

And Christ the King Sunday comes to my rescue with two insights.
 First, I should not look to a head of government for my salvation.
 Help yes, but ultimately other things are more important.
 Second, all of us are judged by a higher standard, a higher power.
 My job is not to win the political battles (though I try);
 my job is to help bring about the Kingdom of God.

We are blessed in the US by how often the will of God and public policy go hand in hand.
 We have programs to help the poor and the sick.
 Our foreign policy often looks to the good of the world and not only the good of the US.
 We value creativity, productivity, communication, and education.
 I am a big fan of the United States.
 We can, and have, and will do great things.

Historically, Christians have not been so lucky.
 Many governments, perhaps most governments,
 have a very poor record when it comes to taking care of the last and least,
 helping other nations,
 and using their power wisely.
 And so the saints have commented – extensively – on what it means to live on Earth,
 subject to human rulers who do not hear our cries
 and sometimes harm us.
 If you have the chance, I strongly recommend reading
 Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr.
 among the modern followers of Christ.
 Reaching back, we can look to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day as well.

Be not afraid.
 It is, I think, the default setting for Christians to be worried about Earthly rulers.
 Power is a difficult thing.

In our usual, somewhat complicated way, Christians recall that Christ is King,
 by recalling that Christ was crucified.
 We tell the story of Jesus mocked and killed by the government of the day,
 with the sarcastic remark, *Iesu Nazarenum, Rex Iuderium* –
 Jesus Christ, King of the Jews.
 The sign at the top of the cross indicated the crime
 for which the person was being executed.
 It might say “murderer” or “spy.”
 This one said, “King of the Jews” as an insult to the Jewish authorities
 who had brought Jesus to Pilate for trial in the first place.
 It was meant to threaten both Jesus followers and the Jewish authorities.
 “Look what the Roman Governor – on behalf of the Emperor – can do.”
 “Look what power we have over life and death.”

And therein lies the joke,
 for Jesus conquered death.
 The dread punishment of the Romans – crucifixion –
 failed.
 Jesus returned from death.

And this is terribly, terribly important.
 I cannot emphasize it strongly enough.
 Jesus did not overcome death with death.
 Despite expectations, Jesus did not mount an armed rebellion
 and retake Jerusalem from the Romans.
 Jesus would not raise a sword to the soldiers who came to capture him.
 He did not even raise his voice to the Jewish tribunal and the Roman Governor.
 Jesus' priorities do not start with preventing, escaping, or creating death.
 They start with life and love.

We have very concrete suggestions from the Bible and tradition
 for how to pursue the priorities of Jesus.
 Love one another.
 Turn the other cheek.
 Forgive your enemies.
 Pray for those who persecute you.
 Build communities.
 Tell the truth.
 Care for those who cannot care for themselves.

It sounds straightforward, but it is painfully difficult,
 when the demands of the world and the government press upon us.
 Our bodies say "eat, drink, defend yourself."
 Our governments say "conform, commit, buy."

I don't think they are bad things.
 I think they are good.
 I think it's important to take care of our bodies and our families.
 I think it's important to value and serve our country,
 when our country is working for the good of the world.
 And our country often does.

But we must never think these are the highest goals.
 We must never think they are the best goods.
 That means worshiping them in place of God.
 Idolatry.

Christ the King puts elections in perspective.
 We have a higher calling to pursue love and life.
 No matter how we feel about an election,
 it cannot be the end of the world
 nor can it save us.
 God does those things.

So, let us turn to concrete responses to our situation.
 First, we must remember who adopted us and who promises true hope:
 God the Father through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
 That is our core identity, more than Democrats or Republicans
 or even Americans.
 We are the beloved of God.

Second, governments, like people, are imperfect.
 They fail to live up to the standards set for us by Jesus.
 The government cannot be perfect, but we can always strive to make it better.
 I believe in democracy – I believe that we are the power behind the government.
 We must all be involved in shaping the future of the US
 because there are real choices set before us, choices that matter.
 Vote, caucus, advocate, protest.

Third, keep your eyes on the prize.
 Governments cannot save people, but love can.
 It's hard to believe sometimes that mercy and forgiveness, truth and reconciliation
 can be more powerful than swords and guns, but they are.
 They are the only way to make lasting change.

And fourth, frustrating but true,
 Our path is not one of comfort or of calm.
 We ask not for a stable life, but for an eternal one.
 We should value governments, protect and serve them.
 We should seek the good of country, family, and self.
 I will never disparage those.

But they cannot be as important to us as our Christian values,
 Faith, hope, and love;
 justice, kindness, and humility;
 curiosity, forgiveness, and community.
 Sometimes those values will come in conflict with
 security, conformity, and comfort.
 Sometimes they conflict with life itself.
 We must be ready to make the right choice.

I want to end with two quotes,
both of which say Christ is King in their own way.

The first is a tale of Abraham Lincoln, one of my favorites.

To a minister who said he hoped the Lord was on our side,
[President Lincoln] replied that it gave him no concern
whether the Lord was on our side or not
“For,” he added, “I know the Lord is always on the side of right;”
and with deep feeling added,
“But God is my witness that it is my constant anxiety and prayer
that both myself and this nation should be on the Lord’s side.

And the second is from I Corinthians.

“Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.
But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;
as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will come to an end.
For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;
but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end...
For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.
And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”