

Sermon for 24.11.19      Rev'd Jenny Simson

Today is the last Sunday in our church calendar, and on this day our year comes to a close on a victorious note with the feast of Christ the King. The focus of the feast is the victory that Christ won for the world through his life, death and resurrection.

Next Sunday, we begin the new year with the first Sunday of Advent season when as we celebrate the coming of the Christ child at Christmas and to the second coming of Christ in the future time.

During the church calendar year our lectionary takes us on a seemingly never ending journey through time and space via the scriptural revelatory stories of Jesus Christ in the world.

These stories are personal ones about the way of the kingdom that Jesus reveals, and, as such, they meet, and mostly challenge our own personal stories about our way in the world.

This faith filled meeting together between ourselves and Jesus through the narrative of his life and ours in the world, is the ground of our relationship with him through the living word.

The feast that we celebrate today – that of Christ the king, is a relatively recent addition to the Western liturgical calendar. It was instituted in 1925 by the then Pope Pius XI for the Roman Catholic Church.

The Anglican, Lutheran and many other Protestant churches also celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. The title refers to the idea of the Kingdom of God in which the Christ is described as seated at the Right Hand of God (as opposed to the secular title of King of the Jews mockingly given at the crucifixion). And in the reading from Colossians today, we hear those beautiful words that refer to Christ the king as the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; and the one who holds all things in creation together.

In the Old Testament reading today from Jerimiah – we hear what will ultimately happen at the close of the reign of individual kings who have failed in their rule of the people.

Jerimiah prophesies that the last king of Judah will belong to a new messianic era. His name will be “The Lord is our righteousness” and he will reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. Both Israel and Judah will share the messianic salvation. This ideal kingship was a promise of God and has been defined in 2 Samuel and repeated in the psalms (2, 45, 72, 89 and 110).

For the Christian faith this prophesy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ the ideal king. Inaugurating the ideal kingship.

So what sort of king is Jesus Christ – is he like a good sovereign king who has a strong will of duty but with a detachment from personal interest.

Well not according to scripture, for our king—is known to us by another title in the gospels of John, Matthew and Luke – here he is known as the bridegroom – who has as his bride - the church- that is, each one of us.

So when we combine together the titles king and bridegroom, we have an image of a loving personal king who provides, protects and lead us in an intimate way.

In the gospel to day we hear Luke's version of the crucifixion. Jesus walked to Golgotha with two fellow prisoners Luke identifies as 'criminals,' in Matthew and Mark they are called "bandits". John simply states there were "two others, one on each side."

Then right in the middle of the crucifixion, Jesus prays; "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." These simple words of prayer, are dramatic and radical, for they go against the grain of tribal law summed up in the adage: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

As the three hung on their crosses, on lookers cast lots for Jesus's clothes and scoffed; and – challenged Jesus to use his powers to save himself. The two criminals also spoke, and as theologian Alex Shaia suggests, Luke clearly intends for them to represent two competing voices within the community.<sup>1</sup>

The first criminal was one who was frightened and self-pitying, longing for a miracle-worker to come and rescue him. The second criminal was one who recognised truth, who accepted the justice of his sentence, spoke of his faith in Jesus's kingdom to come, and rebuked the first way of the first criminal.

Now the way of competing voices relating either to personal journey or communal journey is a part of the human reality and the consequences that befall either the person or the community through their debate have a sameness about them.

For example looking at the two competing voices on the crosses either side of Jesus – one is self-centred self-pitying wanting someone else to take care of salvation while not welcoming or indeed recognising the need for change –the other one recognises and accepts past failures and consequential punishment while at the same time is open to a new kind of relationship in which hopefulness reigns for a better future.

The consequence of the attitude of the first voice is to remain in oppression until inevitable death - and for the second voice, it is to grow in truth even in the face of death.

Luke's message presents us with a new way of being, a new social doctrine, that offers a hope filled path through the oppression of the crises of the day that pervades any era.

We are to face up to our past flaws through an attitude of recognition and acceptance, regardless of our station, circumstances, or tribulations, like that of the second criminal on the cross. Luke implores us to be strong and faithful and, in turn, promises that for our efforts paradise in the kingdom can be ours.

For us today in our world of crises upon crisis, we do well to hold in our hearts the reality that in the middle of all our troubles whether they be personal or communal, Christ the king, our

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander J. Shaia with Michelle Gaugy. *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*. Harper One, New York: 2010.

bridegroom, in there with us, offering forgiveness and making new through change and reconciliation and leading us as part of his father's creation into wholeness in the kingdom.

let us pray...

Christ our king we pray that you will reign in our minds, in our wills, in our hearts and in our bodies. In all of our parts we surrender to your sovereignty in our lives. Amen.

The Lord be with you.