

CHRIST THE KING NOVEMBER 21, 2010 CYCLE "C"

CHRIST OUR KING REIGNS FOREVER!

READINGS: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Ps.46, Col.1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

The focus of our liturgical celebration today is on the kingship of Jesus. In our first reading Jeremiah prophesies that the puppet King, Zedekiah, set over the Israelites by their Babylonian captors was a terrible shepherd and mismanaged the flock of God. Jeremiah promises God's people, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock...I will bring them back to their fold...I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them and they shall not fear any longer...I will raise up for David a righteous Branch...he will be called 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" Jer.23,3,4,5,6b. We Christians, of course, see the total fulfillment of his prophetic words in Jesus.

It is in our selection from Colossians that we see this notion of royalty and kingship summed up for us. In one of the great Christological hymns of the New Testament, Paul reminds us that our Lord, Jesus, preexisted with God the Father from all eternity, "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." Col.1:15-17. And in the second part of this beautiful hymn we see the redeeming work of Jesus our King, "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" Col.1:18-20.

This leads us directly to our Gospel pericope. We might wonder about this Gospel since it brings us to the cross and Jesus crucified. How can Luke take us to the cross to proclaim the kingship of Christ? We know there are three crosses on Calvary. On each side of Jesus hang two criminals. One man, bitter and angry, joins the jeering mob and mocks Jesus. The other was different, he realized the situation. It's very rare that criminals admit their guilt even after overwhelming evidence against them. There is, however, the case related by the Rev. Jerry Ruff: There were two men on trial in the Southwest for armed robbery and assault. As the prosecutor questioned the victim, you could hear a pin drop in the courtroom. He quizzed her

about the gunpoint robbery she and her husband had experienced. Her voice quivering, the woman spoke of her fear and terror. Noting this, the prosecutor raised his voice and turned away from the woman and asked sternly, "Are the two men who committed this horrible crime in the courtroom today?" At that the two defendants raised their hands. The courtroom galley and even the judge snickered. Noticing the two arms in the air, the prosecutor intones, "Your Honor, may the record show that the defendants raised their hands and have just confessed to the crime."

There is, however, nothing comical about our criminal today. Actually Luke presents us with a paradox. It seems inexplicable that Jesus, the fulfillment of the prophets, he who is the King of the Jews, true Son of God and Son of man, our Messiah and King, is hung upon a cross. It seems ironic, too, that all those who should recognize who Jesus is, totally miss it and mock him and that a criminal, one who suffers his same fate, sees, believes, and begs his pardon. But this is the litmus test for Luke and, in turn, so important for us to understand. The two criminals Luke presents in his Gospel not only fulfill the prophet's message, but show us profoundly what Luke's understanding of the crucifixion is and how it relates to Jesus' kingship.

Luke tells us there were so many ways Jesus' kingship was acknowledged, but either denied or not recognized. From Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" to the "elegant robe" Herod threw on him, to the mocking of the soldiers and the crowd, to the sign above his head which proclaimed him as "King of the Jews", all acknowledge who Jesus is. But it took the faith of the criminal who was crucified with him to bring Christ's kingship into reality and make it manifest. He looks from his own cross to his Lord and pleads, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." A criminal who acknowledges that he deserves his punishment and that Jesus is innocent, sees the crucified Christ on the cross next to him and asks him to exercise his royal prerogative for his sake! How awesome is that! And how does Jesus respond? With his out-stretched arms of love, he gives this man more than he asked for. "Truly I tell you; today you will be with me in paradise." Lk.23:43. His Lord and King opened the doors of heaven to him because he saw Jesus through the eyes of faith in spite of all the swirling contrary evidence of those who surrounded him.

Here is precisely where Luke is showing us what Jesus' kingship is all about. Just what makes our King? What is Luke asking us to see here? What is so important for Luke and for us? It is, in fact, this says Luke; even when you strip away all pomp and circumstance, all the show, all the public demonstrations of power, all

the wealth, when you strip away the last shred of human dignity. When he is hung on the cross to die, what truly makes our King is not ermine or gold or courtly retinues. The only way to recognize this crucified King, is in his power to pardon. Luke takes us to the cross and we watch every external sign of his kingship stripped away – save one: his power to pardon. Against all odds and despite all the contrary evidence, Luke's second criminal saw the King on his crude throne, believed, sought forgiveness and received so much more. That very day he received paradise.

Luke asks each one of us today, do you really believe? Do you recognize him; truly recognize him as your King who reigns forever even on the cross? Do you recognize his power to pardon you? Do you, like the criminal who hung beside him, beg for that pardon? Do you see your King, your crucified King, crave for his reign in your hearts and plead for his gift of paradise? **Amen.**

Pastor Barney