

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

Proper 29

Year C

RCL



Colossians 1:11-20

Psalms 46

Luke 23:33-43

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.

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.

Psalm 46 Page 649, BCP

Deus noster refugium

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea;
- 3 Though its waters rage and foam,
and though the mountains tremble at its tumult.
- 4 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.
- 5 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- 6 God is in the midst of her;
she shall not be overthrown;
God shall help her at the break of day.
- 7 The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are shaken;
God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away.
- 8 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.
- 9 Come now and look upon the works of the LORD,
what awesome things he has done on earth.
- 10 It is he who makes war to cease in all the world;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
and burns the shields with fire.
- 11 “Be still, then, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations;
I will be exalted in the earth.”
- 12 The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

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

Quite a long while ago, when your ancient relatives were running around naked in the jungle hitting rabbits in the head with rocks, an important lesson was learned. The lesson was this: the world is full of creatures that will eat you, and most of them are bigger and stronger than you are. Shortly after learning this lesson, your ancient relatives encountered others of their own kind and learned another lesson: the world is full of people who will eat you, or kill you for no adequately explained reason. From these two hard lessons arose the concept of community, or, as I'd like you to think about it today, common unity. A common unity is a stable group consisting of people you know. You might not like them, or even agree with them about important matters, but you know them. My friend, Lon Oliver, holds views on politics, the economy and the role of government which are quite different from mine, but he doesn't stop being my friend just because he is wrong. He remains part of my common unity.

Interestingly enough, those who study these things have come up with a number, called “Dunbar’s Number” (after Robin Dunbar) that is generally thought to lie between 100 and 230. The number 150 is often used. People can maintain stable relationships – a common unity – with only about 150 people. That is the size of our common unity — about a hundred fifty people. Groups larger than that get more complicated and less stable unless they are gathered only temporarily at Rupp Arena, and even then sometimes they get rowdy.

Since the idea of community arose as a strategy to avoid being someone else’s lunch, the consequences of making a bad guess about who is and who is not part of our common unity got hard wired into our brains eons ago. Somewhere down in the scary parts of our minds lies the conviction that those outside our common unity are to be feared. We want, most of all, a homogeneous common unity. Regrettably for the scary parts of our minds, we live in a country which describes itself as a “melting pot”, a country which is, by its

own admission, heterogeneous. Even worse for those of us who insist on following the teachings of Jesus Christ, we serve a God who claims all His children and who expects us to approach them as a reflection of the love He has shown us.

Tricky problem, that. God urges us to love those of His children who we, somewhere down in the scary part of our minds, are convinced want to throw us on the barbie. No wonder we so often try to water down the Gospel into something less scary!

So what happens when we are forced to live in communities which are larger than Dunbar's Number? How do we peacefully interact with the groups we find ourselves within which are so large that we can't know everyone? Well, we make laws. We say, "We don't know whether we trust you to act in reasonable ways, so we will set out in laws what we expect of you, and if you don't behave in accordance with them, then we get to throw you on the barbie, metaphorically speaking."

And that brings us to Jerusalem, sometime around 30 c.e. and to a place Luke calls “The Skull”. What in the world is “Jesussomethingfromsomewhereupnorth” doing being escorted by Roman soldiers to a public execution? What in the world was “Jesussomethingfromsomewhereupnorth” doing getting an audience with both Pilate AND Herod? For goodness sake! If the guy was a problem, do you not think Pilate could make him disappear without all this fuss? A word from Pilate or one of his captains, a splash in the Tiber, problem solved. What has Jesus done which would move the powers that be to so visibly involve themselves?

The Roman Empire, sometime around 30 c.e. encircled the Mediterranean. It stretched from Judea in the east to France and Spain in the west and embraced countless common unities, none of which trusted the others. To keep such a thing together, Rome had to have strict laws and unquestioning obedience. For the powers that be to have involved themselves so visibly in the matter of “Jesussomethingfrom-

somewhereupnorth”, he must have done something that rocked the boat mightily, and indeed, He did. Jesus told people that Roman power, and Roman violence, and even Roman cruelty were the answer only to a problem of our own creation. We see “the other” as “the enemy”. God sees them as His Children. Were we to correct our vision, see past our Dunbar’s Number horizon and embrace God’s vision, we would come to see the world as God does, and that would be infinitely better. Our mistrust of “the other” has shattered God’s family into warring factions like broken shards of glass. Rome thought the only way to hold it together was by Roman force. Jesus told Rome that they did not hold that power, for:

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.

{Lift the cross} It is the power of the cross which holds our shattered common unity together, church, just as this cross holds together all those tiny pieces of shattered glass. The Roman authorities did not know that, and I would hazard that we still don't believe it in any realistic way, or we don't act as if we do. We're still hard wired to see our common unity in small groups. We mentally still live in a village. Jesus is teaching that we are part of God's creation and that all things have been created through him and for him. We're convinced that big parts of what God has created wish to throw us on the barbie. Watching the activities of other common unities as they struggle with the same fear only convinces all the us more. It's no wonder that Jesus prayed for all of us, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." We're as clueless as baboons. God is doing his dead-level best to instruct us, for "God loves you just the way you are, but He *refuses* to leave you that way."¹ Our job is to listen.

Ancient Chinese story (probably made up right here on

¹ Max Lucado

the spot). A saint was given a tour of heaven and hell. In hell, he saw the damned, hollow-eyed, starving around a table filled with the finest food imaginable. Each of the souls held an enormous pair of chopsticks, much too long to eat with. Because they could only eat with chopsticks, they were damned to starve for all time in sight of their salvation, but unable to reach it.

Next the saint was shown heaven. An identical table with identical food stretched before him. Around the table sat the saints with the same long chopsticks. They were well fed because they used the long chopsticks to feed one another. It is our hard-wired fear of those outside our common unity which has scattered us into fearful enclaves and away from the common unity God gave us, leaving us damned to starve for all time in sight of our salvation. We are damned by our ancient human fear of the other into scattered communities of suffering.

God spoke through Jeremiah.

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.

God then promised that He would undertake what we, sinners that we are, were unable to do.

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.

Preachers are forever saying things like that, and we listen and think, “Wouldn’t that be wonderful? But it ain’t happening...” Then we go off and review the reasons why that’s not happening. God’s response, from our call to worship, is thunderous.

Be still, then, and know that I am God;

“Be still and know that I am God”. Can you hear that,

church? Can you wrap your mind around that statement? Be still and know that I am God. Stop your protests. Stop your arguments about “the other” who you fear. I am God! I am the other. I am not part of your common unity that you should argue with me, and however comforting it might be to imagine otherwise, Jesus ain’t your fishin’ buddy. I am God! I have come in your likeness to rescue you from the power of darkness and transfer you into the kingdom of my beloved Son. 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. Be still and know that I am God!

Of course, we're much too fearful to listen. It is the way of the world to be comfortable only with those within our common unity, and to fear all outside it. To play both ends against the middle, we invite God into our common unity, and then claim Him for our own, on our terms. That’s back-

wards! God doesn't belong to us; we belong to Him. "Be **still** and know that I am God", God tells us.

Be still, church. In your prayers, be still. In your reaching toward God, be still. Psalm 23 tells us that "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me". The goodness and mercy following you, pursuing you, really, is God. Allow Him to welcome you into His community and you will find that your fears evaporate, unless you are one who encourages fear and scatters God's people. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD." And woe to those who listen to these shepherds.

{RAISE CROSS}

Here is your common unity now, Church. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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