

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Last Sunday after Pentecost



Christ the King
Year C
RCL

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Canticle 16
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.*

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.”

Canticle 16

The Song of Zechariah

Luke 1: 68-79

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior, *
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies, *
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers *
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,
*
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, *
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, *
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his
way,

To give people knowledge of salvation *
by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy
Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for
ever. Amen.

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

Today is Christ the King Sunday. I don't remember Christ the King Sunday being mentioned at First Presbyterian when I was a kid. The kid year offered New Years' (when dad woke us at midnight to shoot the old Fox shotgun into the air for no clearly explained reason), Easter (when we were given a live baby animal which would shortly die in some horrible way), Halloween (which meant we could extort candy), Thanksgiving (when we endured dinner at Aunt Jess' house so we could get snow cream candy), then Christmas, which requires no further explanation. No mention of Christ the King Sunday that I recall, which is a shame. Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday in Ordi-

nary time, the end of the liturgical year, and the introduction to Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year. Christ the King Sunday is kind of a big deal.

Christ the King Sunday, or, more properly, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, so it's a relatively recent addition to the Revised Common Lectionary. It is recognized by the Presbyterian Church as well as other Protestant churches who follow the Revised Common Lectionary.

“The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe” IS a big deal. Really, it's too big a deal for us to get our minds around. “King of the

Universe”? My understanding, my capacity, is too small by far to grasp such a concept. Pius XI, though, wanted the Feast to impact the laity, not just theologians. He began by saying:

“If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire.

This inclusivity is shocking to human minds accustomed to tribal ways. We are most comfortable dividing the world into “us” and “them” and further dividing our actions into “religious stuff” and “just stuff”. Pius’s words stand in sharp contrast to human understanding by asserting Christ’s claim,

not only to all men, but to every aspect of every man's being. He expanded on the dimensions of that assertion.

He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.”

That's a tall order. We are called to assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. That's terribly

challenging. We don't naturally submit to anything beyond our own desires. Generally speaking, we manage submission most successfully on Sunday morning, and find it most challenging in the midst of regular life. We have to be practical, we tell ourselves, so it's no surprise that the text from Luke for this, the last Sunday in Year C, is the most impractical imaginable.

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.

If ever there were an impractical site for a theological discussion, this is it. These men are being tortured to death, but it Luke's telling, the discussion sounds like a debate in the synagogue. That's because the reality of what is happening is too hor-

rible for us to engage in any other way. These men are hanging on crosses. Crucifixion kills by suffocation. Eventually, the victim's legs and arms can no longer support him and his lungs collapse. The end is inevitable, but as slow and agonizing as the human mind can conceive. These men are choking out the last of their lives in agony while the crowd ridicules them, laughing at their torture and coming death. These men are as abandoned and lost as anyone can be, yet one of them joins the crowd in their ridicule!

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

Can you imagine that? The man is dying in torment, and he can't think of anything better to do

than to taunt Jesus. Maybe that's not surprising.

We're a pretty awful bunch, humanity. It is only by turning to God's righteousness that we can live in hope.

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."

That's what makes what happens next so astounding. The remaining criminal, choking out his life as well, in equal agony with the other criminal and Jesus, a man at the end of his life, preached a sermon:

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.”

Through the horrors of death by crucifixion, this man recognizes Jesus and cries out:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Christ the King, from his cross speaks truth to humanity

He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

May we ever hear His words. May we celebrate with Jeremiah that “The LORD is our righteousness.”

AMEN

BENEDICTION

We search for righteousness within ourselves. We wish to be judged worthy, but we need to be reminded that The LORD is our righteousness and that Christ is King.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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