

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: The Reign of Christ

Parish of St. John the Baptist, North Sydney, Nova Scotia

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

To hear an audio version of this homily go to: <https://douglasabeck.com/2019/11/28/reign-of-christ/?fbclid=IwAR0feLbZvCXLorBD8bHlhgegJZQw7JP2vyGUnYxRYXTjwMmofJLmHn4qg5c>

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, our Lord and King, grant that all peoples of the earth, now divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his gentle and loving rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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Even today, it is a horrific scene. Jesus is crucified in the mayhem of the mocking crowd among thieves. This scene is full of characters who are not what they seem to be.

A criminal who refuses to budge. The suffering Son of Man who practices what he preaches.

After all, that's what brings him to this place. And, a remorseful criminal who humbly understands that at this final moment, it is not too late for him to make a different choice than any he had made before in his miserable life. His choice makes all the difference.

The second criminal, in a way, understands that his crimes exile him from the rest of society.

The first criminal may have understood this on some level, too. One was stubborn enough, perhaps he was hardened by the situations of life and the thinking that he was not worth much, even to God. And though both were sentenced to death, exiled from living because what they

had done, there hung the Lord, exiled for the good that he had done that threatened the status quo, the humdrum life that can feel like the day to day.

Exiled from life, Jesus is the one that stands in for the many. Jesus innocence bears such cruel punishment for the sins of the world. He was guilty of shining the light of God, bringing love and justice to those who, without him, cannot know love and justice. He did this denying self and giving all that he had in fulfillment of God's purpose for him.

Jesus redefines power again and again. In him, the poor are made rich spiritually. The weak learn they are the strong ones. The bruised and battered, the abused in every way imaginable, they were welcomed into a love that can never let them go. The cross seals this for all who continue to come to him by faith, living out transformed lives in the midst of what would otherwise seem impossible. Nothing is impossible with him because he takes the fate of all that come to him upon himself, just as he did the second criminal and ever so many before.

This is how loved the world is. Here I am reminded of these words from John's Gospel. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes on him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have everlasting life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but to save it."

An exhausted Jesus prays in the midst of the noise and confusion, the bullying, the horror, the agony. In praying “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing,” he sets the tone for what happens next. One criminal questions the other, “Don’t you fear God? We are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has not done anything wrong.”

Then he says to the Lord, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replies, “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

We live in a confusing world where judgment is too often misconstrued as the way of God. This is one of the world’s greatest lies. Notice that the criminal who rejects Jesus isn’t rejecting God’s judgment but God’s love. In a sense, the criminal who rejects Jesus condemns himself.

Contrast this with the criminal that receives the assurance of going on with Jesus to paradise. In so doing, he reaches out to Jesus in love and humility knowing that he is more than the wrongs that he has committed. This is what God’s love through faith in Jesus Christ does for all who come.

In Luke’s account of this scene we see how the crucifixion is “the means by which the powers of darkness are defeated, so that God’s kingdom, his newly minted sovereign rule over the world, can at last begin. Second, this is accomplished because the innocent Jesus is dying the death of the guilty” (N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 215).

May we live ever more fully into the grace and humility, boldly living the love of Christ, who reigns over us. When we boldly live the love of Christ we honour Jesus, because his cross “[towers] over (and above) the wrecks of time” as one hymnwriter says.

Jesus gave up himself and forever reigns so that we may forever be in his presence, yesterday, today and for always; if we will with the second criminal, pray: “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

Then, hear Jesus say to us: “You will be with me in paradise.”

In the name of God: +Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.