

“The Righteous Branch”

Luke 23:33-43; Jeremiah 23:1-6

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

November 24, 2019

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the one particular Sunday in the Christian year when we remember and commemorate the reality that Jesus Christ stands (or sits) enthroned in the heavens, Lord of All, and Head of the Church. He is the one to whom we bow down, the one above all others who deserves our supreme allegiance, the one whose word above all others we are called to hear and obey.

We might wonder why we should have but *one* day in the Christian year to acknowledge this truth. Is not Jesus King *all* the time? *Every* day of the year? Yes, of course. There is not one day out of the 365 when we should *not* be acknowledging him as Lord of All. He is enthroned *forever*. He never takes a break, never gets a day off, never goes on vacation. He is there ... *all the time*. (Thank God!)

We did not always celebrate Christ the King Sunday. If you had been at this church – or at any church – a hundred years ago, there would not have been a Christ the King Sunday. I was surprised to discover this. The commemoration was created by Pope Pius XI in 1925, less than a century ago. Originally it was a Roman Catholic feast, but over time various Protestant denominations picked it up as well, for we all recognized that we need to spend a day remembering Christ’s Kingship, and reminding people what that means. Every country has its own king, its own prime minister, its own president; sometimes we get short-sighted and think that *our* country is the only country that matters, that *our* king is the one whose rule should reign supreme. Remember what was going on in the 1920’s; we were heading into the days of Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler; nationalism and fascism were on the rise. The Church responded: *Jesus Christ* is our King. *He* is the one who deserves our supreme allegiance. *No one else* has the right to claim *absolute* power, *absolute* dominion, *absolute* loyalty. Pope Pius issued a statement to this effect. The language is a little archaic, but listen for the truth in his words: “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. 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.” (Pope Pius XI, *Quas primas*, §33) In other words: *every last part of our being* – spirit, soul, and body – should be subject to Christ’s will.

Today's passage from Luke's gospel reminds us that – while many of Jesus' followers were ready to call him Lord and submit to his will – many other people were not. Many people thought that Jesus was merely *pretending* to be a king. They mocked him, as they nailed him to the cross: "Hail, King of the Jews!" "If you really are the Messiah, save yourself!" They did not understand that Christ's kingship was made perfect through his sacrificial death on the cross, through his blood spilled for us all. They had no idea that what they were doing to him was actually a necessary part of God's plan for our salvation – and that they were actually *helping* him to take his place at the right hand of God in the heavenly realm.

But let's step back a bit further in time, some six centuries before Christ, to the oracles of Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah, you may recall, was alive at the time of Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonian empire. He was the counselor to the king – at least, sort of. King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah and Jerusalem before they were crushed by the might of Babylon's armies. Zedekiah was essentially a puppet king that Babylon had placed on the throne. Basically, Babylon just wanted Zedekiah to keep quiet, not cause any trouble, send Babylon lots of money, and Babylon would just leave Jerusalem alone. But Zedekiah – against Jeremiah's advice – decided to revolt against Babylon. That was a grievous mistake, and it resulted in ruin and disaster for the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

In the midst of that extended crisis, Jeremiah uttered these prophetic words: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.... 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." He was speaking about Zedekiah, and the other government officials, and all of their predecessors who paid little or no heed to the Word of the Lord. *They've made a bunch of bad decisions, which will hurt the whole people*, is what he was saying. *They have failed to follow God's will. They – and the people – will suffer, as a result.* A good reminder to all of us, in *any* age – to look for leaders who will strive to do *God's* will, leaders who will try hard to be *faithful*, to execute their rule with *justice* and *righteousness*, leaders who walk with faith and integrity in their hearts.

But, says Jeremiah, all is not lost for those poor people of Judah and Jerusalem. God has a bright future planned for them, after the terrible destruction; a future filled with hope. "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." God will still look after God's people, *even if* their leaders have led them astray. Jeremiah is speaking in general terms, about the restoration of Jerusalem that will come later on, some seventy years after the city's fall. But there's more: "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." A righteous king for the people of God ... imagine that. Someone descended from David ... imagine that. "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 last bit is a direct jab at King Zedekiah: Zedekiah's name literally means, "The Lord is *my* righteousness." But it was a name in name only; Zedekiah's decisions and policies gave clear indication that he did not live up to his name. But this new king, this prophesied king ... he will be called: "The Lord is *my* righteousness." He will *truly* serve God.

Jeremiah was talking about Jesus, of course. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The *Messiah*.

Jeremiah calls him a “righteous Branch.” Ten chapters later he basically repeats himself: “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” (Jeremiah 33:15) The prophet Isaiah also uses the same word: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Isaiah 11:1) A righteous branch, from the stump of Jesse, who was David’s father. “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” (Isaiah 11:2) Prophetic oracle is heaped upon prophetic oracle, a whole series of prophecies in the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah about the king who is to come, many of which we will be repeating in the weeks of Advent that are almost upon us, all pointing towards Jesus, our righteous King.

This “righteous branch” is depicted with great frequency in Christian art from the medieval period. Christian artists wanted to demonstrate, visually, what it meant to say that “a righteous Branch shall spring up for David,” or that “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” This is a fairly typical example: here is Jesse, David’s father, at the bottom of the painting. Can you see the tree trunk that is growing out of Jesse’s chest? It shoots upward, sending off branches in various directions. This one shows about six people on the right of the tree and six people on the left; these are all various descendants of Jesse, in the ancestral line that leads to Jesus Christ. Matthew and Luke both name more than two dozen men who stood in direct descent from Jesse to Jesus; what you see in art like this is a representation of some of those. And there, clearly positioned at the top of the painting, is the Virgin Mary, with the Christ child in her arms. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse;” “a righteous Branch will spring up for David” – here it is, in visual form ... what is called a “Jesse tree.”

Here’s another one. This is a window from the Saint-Étienne church in Beauvais, France. There’s Jesse, at the bottom, with a trunk growing out of his chest, extending upwards, separating into branches, connecting his descendants, all the way to the top, where – in dazzling brightness – we find the Virgin Mary and the Christ child. And here’s another one, even more magnificent, from St. Mary’s Church in Shrewsbury, England. The detail is hard to see, but that’s Jesse, reclining near the bottom. Here’s a closer view. You can see the tree growing out of him, separating into branches, connecting all his descendants that lead to Jesus. Up near the top we find both Joseph and the Virgin Mary, holding the Christ child. At the very, very top is a representation of Christ on the cross – and the culmination of the branches. The tree goes no further. The line stops with Christ ... because *he’s our King*.

Now this is all beautiful – my gosh, do Christians create art like this anymore?!? – but what’s the point? What’s the *message* for us here? Simply this: *Jesus Christ is our King*. No one else deserves our ultimate allegiance. There’s not one single piece of our existence that should not be subservient to him. And there’s not one single piece of our existence that will not, in the end, be *answerable* to him.

May God grant us the grace, the courage, the wisdom, to follow Jesus Christ, to obey his will, to do his bidding, *every single day* of our lives, till the day comes when we meet him in his eternal kingdom.

© 2019 Rev. Bill Pinches