

## “The Image of the Invisible God”

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

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Christ the King

You may be wondering why the Gospel lesson for today is a portion of the account of Christ’s crucifixion. That’s a story we typically hear on Good Friday, as we recall the events and circumstances that led up to Christ’s saving death on our behalf. What’s it doing *here*, the week before Advent?

Simply put, today is *Christ the King* Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year, an annual celebration in which we remind ourselves that *Jesus Christ is our King*. When Christ was crucified on the cross, there was an inscription placed over his head. It read: “This is the King of the Jews.” That inscription had been placed there by the soldiers who were mocking him. They were making fun of him: *This guy thought he was the King of the Jews. And look at him now! Beaten, bloodied, and dying.* Some of the soldiers down below jeered up at him: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” They knew – they were convinced – that Jesus was some would-be pretender, deluded and maybe crazy. They were, in their minds, justly punishing him for his ridiculousness and his folly.

They were wrong.

One of the criminals who was being crucified next to Jesus sensed that it was, in fact, true. “This man,” he declares, “has done nothing wrong.” Turning his head to Jesus, he begged, “Remember me when you come in your kingdom.” He knew – he was convinced – that Jesus *really was* a King.

He was right. Whether he grasped the *whole* truth about Christ’s eternal Kingdom in the heavenly realm, I don’t know, but he grasped *enough* of the truth to know that the soldiers were making a *big* mistake. Jesus didn’t deserve a cross. He deserved a *crown*. A crown of *glory*.

The fact that Jesus was a King had been prophesied long before. Jeremiah 23 is one of several passages that look ahead to the coming King. God, through Jeremiah, says: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” The word “shepherds” refers to the human kings who ruled over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah centuries before Jesus, and especially to the bad ones. There were a total of 44 kings over Israel and Judah, from Saul in the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC to Zedekiah in the 6<sup>th</sup>. If you read through the books of Kings, you will see that most of them get evaluated, and many of them did things that were “evil in the sight of the Lord.” Jeremiah lived during the days of the last five kings; he knew the history of the kingship better than any of the other prophets. He also witnessed firsthand the ultimate collapse of the kingdom, which he understood to be a direct result of the actions of the people, resulting from the poor leadership of many of their kings over time. Jeremiah declares: “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.” The kingdom is going to fall.

But not all is lost. Jeremiah also looks *beyond* the collapse of the kingdom, toward a future that God will create: “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 no longer fear longer or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.” This is a broad reference to the rebuilding of Jerusalem seventy years later, and ultimately to the restoration of a new Jewish kingdom in the second century BC, after a Jewish uprising against foreign rule. That new kingdom lasted for about a hundred years, until Herod the Great conquered Jerusalem about 33 years before Jesus was born.

Jeremiah’s prediction does not end there: “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.”” In case it’s not obvious, Jeremiah was talking about *Jesus*. Jesus, who – through his adoptive father Joseph – was descended from David, the first great King of Israel. The kings of Judah were all descended from David, and Joseph was descended from that long line of kings. The kingdom had ended; the metaphorical tree had been cut down – but, says Jeremiah, God will “raise up for David a righteous Branch.” That’s Jesus. “He shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Jesus, of course, never reigned as king during his earthly life, but don’t let that fact cause you to stumble. Jeremiah is looking forward yet again, to the glorious exaltation of Jesus after his death, resurrection and ascension, when Christ is King in the heavenly realm – which is what he is right now. Jeremiah continues: “In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety.” Here Jeremiah has taken yet *another* step forward, looking ahead to a time *which has not happened yet*, when Jesus will bring about the final salvation of Judah and Israel. By “Judah and Israel,” he had in mind, first of all, the Jewish people, but there is a passage in Galatians in the New Testament that make it plain that “Israel” can also refer to the entire Christian population, all those who place their trust in Jesus. So this promised salvation of Judah and Israel is good news for both Jews and Christians. It is good news for *us*.

That was complicated, so let me summarize: Jeremiah’s prophecy begins with a *first* step, the restoration of Jerusalem; then proceeds to a *second* step, when a new Jewish kingdom would be established; followed by a *third* step, the coming of Jesus on earth; then a *fourth* step, the exaltation of Christ after his resurrection; and then finally a *fifth* step, a final salvation for both Jews and Christians. It is a remarkable series of steps, *four* of which have already happened. We still await the fifth.

Which is exactly the place where the readers of Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae found themselves. The letter – like *all* parts of the New Testament – was written after Christ had ascended to heaven, but before the final salvation of God. In the grand scheme of things, we’re a lot closer to those first century Christians than we think we are. Much of what Paul wrote to them applies also to us.

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power,” he begins. He is referring to the glorious power of *God*, which can strengthen each and every one of us, “so that you may have all endurance and patience,” endurance and patience to withstand *anything*, “joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” We are the blessed inheritors of God’s magnificent gifts to all God’s children, which should lead us to a profound sense of gratitude and thanksgiving. What are some of those gifts? Chief among them is this: “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.” We have been brought into the Kingdom, through our trust in Christ. We have been rescued from every temptation to do evil

(provided we maintain steadfast devotion to Jesus); we have been bought with the price of Christ's own blood; we have been granted forgiveness for every single one of our sins. That's a *tremendous* amount of generosity on God's part, given to us *freely*, the most amazing gift anyone has ever received.

The next part of Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae appears to have been part of a song – one of the very earliest Christian hymns! – a song about Jesus, which Paul is quoting from. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Jesus is made in the very image of God, just like all of us are, except that Jesus wasn't *made*. God didn't *create* Jesus, the way God created all the living things on this earth. No, God *gave birth* to Jesus, before God began to create *anything* in the universe, even before time itself. Jesus existed eternally with God before God made *anything*. Indeed, everything that exists owes its existence to Jesus as much as to God, “for in (or by) him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.” That means not only all the things on this earth, and on all other planets, but also everything in the heavenly realm, all the *spiritual* beings, including both angels and demons. When we get to Christmas, when we hear the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary, and the angels visiting the shepherds, we need to remember that Jesus existed *before* those angels did, and indeed, *he helped create them!* And when we get to the stories in the gospels about the demons that Jesus cast out of people, the demons who *knew who Jesus was*, well, remember, *Jesus helped create them too*. For “all things have been created through him and for him.” *Nothing* exists without Jesus! “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Jesus is the bond that *unites all things into one*.

If *that's* not enough to amaze you, well, Paul – and the hymn – go on. “He is the head of the body, the church.” Our church has pastors and elders and deacons; other denominations have priests and bishops; but we are *all* – every single one of us in the church – under the authority of Jesus Christ, and answerable to him. We should *always* keep that in mind! “He is the beginning,” the origin, the genesis, the first cause. He is also “the firstborn from the dead,” the first to experience complete resurrection from the dead, leading the way for all the rest of us. (Some of you may be wondering about Lazarus – didn't Lazarus experience resurrection before Jesus? – and the answer is yes, he did, but Lazarus was not raised at that point to *eternal* life, just to the return of his *earthly* life. There's a difference!) The net result is that Jesus “might come to have first place in everything.” How was this possible? Easy. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” *All* aspects of God's nature were also present in Christ's nature. Jesus was *fully* God. There wasn't a bit of God that was missing. “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” The great separation that had existed between humanity and God – nay, rather, the great separation that had existed between *all* created things and God – the separation that had existed since *almost* the act of creation itself – has now been mended. The great gulf, the great chasm, the great abyss, that had existed for an *extraordinarily* long time, was now, finally, closed. What had been separated was finally united, through Jesus. How? “By making peace through the blood of his cross.” Through Jesus's ultimate act of self-sacrifice, through his death on the cross. The people who brought about the death of Jesus thought that they were bringing an end to one man. Instead, what they unwittingly and unknowingly did was bring about a *new beginning*, a *full restoration*, an *ultimate reconciliation*. A new beginning, a full restoration, an ultimate reconciliation that is available to *every single person*, in all times and in all places. Jesus performed the *greatest single act in the history of the entire universe*.

So we end where we began: with Jesus' death on the cross. “This is the King of the Jews,” the sign read. They were close. Very, very close. Not “the King of the Jews.” The King ... of the *cosmos*.

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