

FOUR TEXTS AND A PROMISE

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Luke 1:67–79

Colossians 1:11–20

Luke 23:33–43

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Reign of Christ Sunday, November 24, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

FOCUS PASSAGES

From Jeremiah 23

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...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 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....

From Luke 1:67 and forward

Then [John the Baptist's] father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

*'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...'*

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

From Luke 23:33 and forward

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 the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' ...

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? ...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.'

Colossians 1:15-20

*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...
He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together...
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.*

Prayer: *The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. But let us pray for but one thing: the marvelous peace of God. Amen.*

I.

I recently learned that the liturgical holiday we are celebrating today – called Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday – is a relatively recent addition to the ancient church calendar known as the lectionary.

Christ the King Sunday was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 – less than a hundred years ago. He instituted the day in response to the growing sentiments toward nationalism and secularism that emerged from the devastation of World War I. In a rare show of ecumenism, Protestants embraced this liturgical designation and added Christ the King to the church calendar every year as the final Sunday in the liturgical year before the new year begins with Advent. Thus, in our country, Christ the King nearly always falls on the Sunday *before* or *after* Thanksgiving, a time when we celebrate and give thanks for all the good we have received from our lives in this land.

But Pius' encyclical points beyond the virtues of being grateful for one's own country. A few years earlier (1922), he had written:

Patriotism – the stimulus of so many virtues and of so many noble acts of heroism when kept within the bounds of the law of Christ – becomes an occasion...[for] grave injustice...when we *forget* that all [people] are...members of the *same great human family*, that other nations have an equal right with us both to *life* and to *prosperity*, that it is never lawful nor even wise, to dissociate morality from the affairs of practical life, that...it is “justice which exalteth a nation: but sin maketh nations miserable” [Proverbs 14:34].

Pius added:

As long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations.¹

It is clear to me, that as Americans and as citizens of the world, when we arise above the tension of immediate political partisanship and division, we have much to be thankful for.

¹ Thanks to Daniel Vigilante's paper on these passages for Christ the King Sunday, 2019, at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar earlier that year.

Across the world, there has been genuine and dramatic progress in terms of the number of people living in democratic societies, the life expectancy of people at birth, and the reduction of the percent of people who live in poverty and illiteracy.

Yet as we look around us at the current state of the world, at least what we imbibe from the sources of news to which we turn, we still yearn for greater evidence of “the peace of Christ.”

- We still have Erdogan and Putin, Bashar al Assad, Kim Jong Un, an ever-restless Iranian regime, threats from cyberwarfare beyond most of our ability to comprehend, and a nervousness that the students seeking freedom in Hong Kong even casting votes in local elections today will find their hopes suppressed with violence.
- Closer to home, we find ourselves immersed in a culture in which ideas and opinions, hopes and dreams, anger and anxiety of citizens seems hardened into camps that change little and where, if you listen to different media outlets, you wonder if such outlets are describing or commenting on the same events.
- In addition, too many of us show little or no restraint in giving free reign to the expression of our inner demons, whether such expression is public or private, live or virtual, tied to facts or rooted in fiction, violent physically or verbally violent, or tied to our own bitterness and disappointment with life, which is often rooted in hard and tragic facts.

In his column that appeared today in *The Washington Post*, George Will writes of an exhibit at New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage entitled “Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.” Will says that in addition to 1.3 million Jews who died at that *one* concentration camp,

What also died at Auschwitz is — was — what is known as the Whig theory of history, which holds, or held, that there is an inevitable unfolding of history in the direction of expanding liberty under law. Just as the Holocaust was not inevitable, neither is the triumph of enlightenment: History is not a ratchet that clicks only one way.

Today [Will continues], in several parts of the world, including on the dark, churned and bloody ground of Central Europe, there are various forms of political regression. These are marked by a recrudescence of the blood-and-soil tribalism of degenerate nationalism, accompanied by thinly veiled, or not at all veiled, anti-Semitism.

Will concludes quoting Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor: “It happened, therefore it can happen again.”

While within Christianity, there are many of us who genuinely search for the peace of Christ beyond the way such peace can come to our individual hearts, there is little evidence of our nation or other nations coming anywhere close to embodying such peace.

II.

Yet on this 94th Christ the King Sunday, the four texts offered by the lectionary remind us and promise the ultimate reign and rule of God.

Writing over five hundred years before the birth of Christ, from a situation in which the people of Israel are living in exile under Babylonian rule, Jeremiah the Prophet castigates his own leaders – called Shepherds of Israel – who have used their power in unjust and abusive ways that have led to their nation’s exile:

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” Jeremiah rails.

So great is the abuse and so un-reformable the Shepherds, Jeremiah promises that God is saying:

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 multiple.

In his moment of despair and critique, Jeremiah is reminded – and in turn reminds us – of God’s promise that down through the centuries God ultimately reigns and rescues, leading Jeremiah to return to the positive and time-tested language he learned from the Creation Story: Humanity – Jeremiah says – “shall” ultimately “be fruitful and multiply.”

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In the second passage we read, from the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah, the father of a newborn child who will grow up to be John the Baptist, hears the word of the Lord make a promise concerning the Messiah whose way Zechariah’s son will prepare:

*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 execute justice and righteousness in the land.
In his days [the Lord promises],
Judah will be saved
And Israel will live in safety.*

Zechariah concludes:

*By the tender mercy of our God,
The dawn from on high will break upon us,
To give light to those who sit in darkness
And in the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.*

A leader who rules with wisdom, justice, righteousness.

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Later, near the end of the Gospel of Luke, the one whom Zechariah’s son has proclaimed speaks his final words from the cross, put to death, partially, for not being the kind of warrior king for which many of the people of God had hoped.

- The soldiers who carry out the crucifixion cast lots for his clothing.

- Those who had sought his death taunted him: “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”
- Soldiers join in the mocking: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”
- Yet in these last and brutal moments of his life, Jesus provides a glimpse at just how different his reign and rule are:
 - “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*”
 - and “*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*”

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And in the fourth and final text for today, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church he has founded at Colossae several decades after the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul inserts words of a hymn which link Christ’s rule back to Creation and forward to eternity and bear witness to how unique Christ’s rule is:

*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...
He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together...*

*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.*

It is a grand hymn of a wonderful promise, eloquent, elusive, but true.

III.

I’ll close with a brief word that has helped me come to understand how the birth of an infant – to impoverished couple in a stable out back behind an inn which has no room in which they can sleep or give birth – can indeed become Christ the King.

It is a phrase one of my teachers, theologian Christopher Morse, now into his eighties, developed over the course of his teaching and writing career:

The reign of Christ is at hand but not yet in hand.

This reign of Christ – so beautiful, so hopeful, so peaceful, so inclusive, so forgiving, so just, so all encompassing – is near but not yet fully here. *At hand but not in hand.*

But, Morse adds: We are *on hand* for the reign of Christ. We prepare for it. We study it, meditate on it day and night, live wherever possible or even wherever stretched as if we were already here, sometimes even at risk to our reputations, our work, even our lives. And in those rare moments where it makes incursions into

our lives or world – and in which we recognize those incursions -- we give ourselves to it, even though we recognize – even then – that we have seen only a smidgeon of what it will be like when finally we have it *in hand*.

One of the great hymns we sing at Christmas is “Joy to the World.” Its final verse proclaims:

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.*

On Christ the King, we remember that Christ rules in such a way that he “makes” even “the nations prove...the wonders of his love.”²

Amen.

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² Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World,” written in 1719, available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/j/o/y/w/joyworld.htm>.