

Christ the King Sunday. Luke 23:33-43  
 Shepherd by the Sea, Gualala, CA. 11/24/19  
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Because Phyllis and I have been preaching every Sunday from June through October, I have a renewed sense in the Gospel readings during that time of the purposeful journey of Jesus to Jerusalem that ends with the account of his execution on Gospel reading for today. His prophetic ministry begins in his home town of Nazareth – the location people often choose to announce a campaign. In the local synagogue, Jesus reads this from the prophet Isaiah: **“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”** When he finished the reading, Jesus said to the people in the synagogue: This work has begun today – with you – in this place. The Kingdom of God has come near to you.

For a time, Jesus went from village to village teaching and healing and gathering disciples and occasionally annoying religious authorities who insisted on a strict interpretation of the law. Love and justice were at the center of what Jesus taught. He had compassion on the sick and the excluded and outcast. In all that he did Jesus embodied a radical vision of a new world that was both inclusive, loving, and just. Jesus gave hope to the poor and those downtrodden under the tyranny of Roman rule. Sometimes, when Jesus was overwhelmed by the expectations of people hungry for liberation from tyranny and poverty or when he was troubled by the fury of the religious leaders, he would retreat with his closest disciples to pray. For time, how long we do not know, Jesus went through cities and villages proclaiming and embodying the good news of the Kingdom of God – a new vision of ordering life together based on love and justice.

On this day, called Christ the King Sunday, it is important pause for a moment and be clear what we mean by ‘the kingdom of God’. Whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say ‘thy kingdom come’ without, I would guess, having a clear sense of what that means. The Kingdom of God is a troublesome term partly because it is so gender specific. If the rule of God is a Kingdom, then God is male. It is also a problem because it sounds hierarchical and top down authoritarian. Most of all, both ancient and modern kings have bad press – and for good reason.

The Biblical report on kings at that time is grim but unfortunately familiar. Kings were fearful, even paranoid, and they gave mandates, manipulated policies, and enlisted loyal subjects in order to harm and diminish people they see as threatening. For example, in order to keep the Hebrew people from gaining in numbers and strength, Pharaoh ordered every Hebrew boy eliminated. King David order Uriah the Hittite to the front lines of battle order to get him out of the way so he could claim Bathsheba as his wife. King Herod was thin-skinned, impulsive, vengeful, demanding absolute loyalty. And so Herod beheaded John the Baptist for disloyalty and later slaughtered innocent children because he was threatened by a baby. Modern princes get by dismembering a journalist and modern authoritarian leaders amass wealth and power and dispose of citizens and still continue to rule. Kings and others who rule like oppressive kings have bad press – and for good reason.

How shall we think about Christ as King when everywhere in the world today rulers are bullies and tyrants even if they are not called KINGS? Can we transform the meaning to the 'Kingdom of God'- the 'Reign of God' Jesus announced in the Synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry in our present time? Given the negativity around kingdom imagery, why in the world is the Sunday before Advent and our anticipation of the birth of Jesus called Christ the King Sunday?

The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, the new Order that Jesus announced and embodied introduced the vision of a radically new kind of king and a new kind of rule. God's reign turns everything upside down. The meek inherit the earth, grievous are comforted, the hungry are fed, the stranger is welcomed. Wherever they went, Jesus and his disciples promised a new world without suffering, without injustice, free from poverty and the powers of evil. It was a transforming vision of the use of power. If you pay attention, Jesus declares, you will see a glimpse of this new reality in every act of healing or feeding or teaching or welcoming the stranger. God's reign – God's ordering of the world in a way of love and righteousness and peace and liberation and abundance has already come in Jesus and is yet to come. God's Rule of love stands in opposition to all our striving for dominance, to all forms of corruption, to every impulse to empire, every bully and every tyrant. This Reign of God – often called the Kingdom of God – is what Jesus announced and embodied everywhere he went throughout Galilee.

After an indefinite time of that ministry, Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus **set his face to go to Jerusalem**. It was, as we would say, against the advice of counsel – or at least the disciples. Jesus was determined, however, to announce this new reign of God to the power brokers in Jerusalem. It was not a popular decision because he would likely face deadly opposition in Jerusalem. Jesus had annoyed religious authorities. Roman political leaders would not look kindly on a popular charismatic religious leader from the country who fearlessly challenged the authority of Herod the king. Although some of his followers were looking for a different kind of King – like David at his best – who would rescue them from political bondage to Rome, Jesus had no sign that he would be that revolutionary who would take on Roman rule. So the journey of Jesus that began in a synagogue in Nazareth ends on a cross on a hill called "the Skull" outside Jerusalem. Hence our Gospel reading for today. Jesus ended his ministry as he began it. He forgave his enemies, included a criminal who was executed with him in the promise of redemption, and had compassion on those who waited with him to die.

The death of Jesus is not unusual according to the way the world works. The just suffer. Goodness is often rewarded with disdain or worse. People die unjustly all the time. The cynical phrase "no good deed goes unpunished" is a shorthand way of saying that life is unfair. People who try to do good things often end up in trouble for doing good. Jesus was the incarnation of goodness – embodying a new vision for humankind of inclusion and compassion and mercy and justice. And for his goodness he was mocked as a king and executed. Being in the presence of the goodness of God and others does not always bring out the best in us. When the goodness of God or others shines a light on our shallowness or selfishness or suspicion, we may not like

what is revealed. When goodness comes to us as the Sovereign God, we may resist looking at our desire for control or at gender dominance or our disdain for people outside our sphere.

Jesus was not the last human person to be ridiculed for doing good. Since Jesus, people continue to be publicly shamed or killed for goodness or for challenging the ruling powers. Smear campaigns on dedicated public servants or tweets ridiculing decorated soldiers or the creation of false narratives are alien to the Reign of God that Jesus announced and embodied. Fear is not what God wants for God's people and fear-mongering is not a characteristic of leaders who follow God's ways. On our worst days, fear drives us to stamp out goodness but it cannot be done. Jesus forgave those who mocked him. Jesus was executed but not destroyed. Every human effort to crush goodness will fail because God's Reign is the final word. When the Kingdom of God comes, when God's rule is established – as we pray it will – ultimate Goodness will prevail in all places and nations will war no more.

So – why is Christ the Vulnerable King a necessary prelude to Advent? With his courageous journey to Jerusalem, the unarmed carpenter's son from Galilee made vulnerability the norm for humankind as well as for God. Moreover, Christ embodied a new way of being and a new kind of ruler, a vulnerable King. Power and vulnerability always belong together in God's realm. And they are joined together in the Child of a Cave in Bethlehem. God, whose power and majesty transcends all knowing, comes to us as a fragile, vulnerable infant.