

"Our Hope for the Future."

Jer. 23:1-6; Ps. 100: Luke 23:33-43

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Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2007

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is a relatively "new" festival in the church year. Many church celebrations date back centuries but this one isn't even 100 years old. Pope Pius the Sixth saw fascism and totalitarianism on the rise and atheistic communism gaining ground and called for this day to be celebrated so that Christians everywhere would remember who is really in charge.

This day also marks the end of the church calendar year and points beyond our present, daily concerns to the reality of God's sovereign reign over all things, things in heaven and in earth and everywhere.

Next week we begin the season of Advent with preparations for the first coming of Christ as a child in Bethlehem. But today we encounter the adult Christ in the most challenging of settings, nailed to the cross. We announce that he is King of kings and Lord of lords, but his throne is built on Calvary's hill and his crown is made of thorns and his scepter is a handful of nails.

Instead of wielding furious power he yields his life. Instead of exacting revenge he offers forgiveness of sins. He turns everything upside down as he promises life out of death and abundant joy and deep peace amidst all the pain and suffering and shallow pleasures of our world.

This king gives his subjects the power to endure all things in hope because he has overcome the world and all its misguided attempts to write the future with the spilled blood of humanity.

Jesus shows us what God is like and what God's love is all about. Compared to the sovereign rule of God there is no other power, no rival, no question of who will win. The victory of God's sovereign love is never in doubt for those who are claimed by that love and seek to live it out.

Since Jesus Christ is King, we know we do not need to be afraid for the future. The one who is risen from the dead has promised us a place in that kingdom. It is secure. Nothing can take it away.

But today's text from Luke's Gospel pushes that affirmation to the extreme. Instead of visions of Christ on high flanked by clouds of glory we see Jesus up on a cross flanked by two criminals. We don't know much about these other two but we do know that when we see the cross of Christ we often see those two other crosses, reminding us of today's scripture from Luke's gospel. The front lawn of Chapel Lane gives us a regular reminder of this story.

As we know, the one criminal ridicules Jesus while the other rebukes him and turns to Jesus with a simple request to be remembered. In response, Jesus gives him the keys of the kingdom and a passport to Paradise. "You want in? You're in!"

But what's more, even before this scene, Jesus has already prayed to God for forgiveness for everyone involved, whether penitent or not: He prays "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do."

Blanket forgiveness has always been hard to fathom. That Jesus would extend forgiveness to those who were most responsible for his death seems beyond comprehension. Down through the years the church has tried to cut this part out of the Gospel, but it keeps resurfacing like that beach ball that we desperately try to keep

under water, only to have it shoot up and shower everyone with water.

The forgiveness, freedom and hope that Jesus has to offer is showered out upon us all. Because he is the king and because he extends his mercy and grace even to folks like us, we know we can be confident that we are part of his kingdom here and now and we look forward to being with him in Paradise.

The hope for our future begins and ends in Christ. Whether we are penitent or petulant, whether we stand in need of forgiveness or stand obstinant and unmoved, whether we have never known a time when we weren't in church or whether this is the first time we have set foot in church in a long, long time, God has already moved toward us in love and in God's own way.

Our hope, as always, lies not with ourselves, but with God. And the story that finds its climax today is the story that shapes our lives and gives us a sense of meaning and a destination that is more than just whatever the next day brings.

When all is said and done the winner is God. There is no second place. God is the beginning and the end of all things. Nothing else should even come close. But, of ten, the reality is that God doesn't necessarily have first place in our hearts and in our lives. We do not always live as loyal subjects of our Lord.

There are many things that would claim our allegiance and would seek to own a piece of us. What do we give our allegiance to? Just look at our checkbooks and our bank statements. They tell the story. What do we give our time to? Our day planners and wall calendars and palm pilots and blackberries tell that story. What do we give our hearts to? Our passions tell that story.

It's not really a coincidence that the time when we consecrate our giving and when we acknowledge the lordship and the kingship of Jesus Christ come at the same time of the year. How do we respond to the one who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords? How do we say "thank you" to the one who has made the future worth living into with the promise of forgiveness and salvation and hope?

We say "thank you" by sharing our experience of the risen Lord, by encouraging one another and lifting one another up. We say "I believe" as we pool our energy and our resources to do what we can to bring about the kind of world we believe is in keeping with the reign of God and the purposes of Christ.

We may not be able to respond to every cry for help, but the variety of mission and ministry opportunities we have can humble us and excite us. We are humbled to know that we have been blessed in so many ways and we can be excited to know that there are meaningful ways to make a difference, for God's sake, in the world that God has created, redeemed and sustained.

As this year in the church comes to a close and as we prepare the way for the birth of our King, we sound a note of hope and commitment, of confidence and determination to remember with thanksgiving that we are God's people. So let us strive to give God first place in our hearts and lives, serving the Lord with joy as we dedicate our lives to the one who has given his life for us and gives us new life each and every day. He is King of kings and Lord of lords!

Thanks be to God!

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