

THE WILLING SACRIFICE

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Lectionary: Jeremiah 23, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20 Luke 23:33-43 (all quotes are from NIV)

Happy New Year!!

So, you are looking a little confused. "What?" You say, "New Year is still 6 weeks away."

Well, that depends upon which New Year you are celebrating. Today is a very special day in the Christian Calendar, today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the Liturgical Calendar. Next week is the beginning of Advent, and therefore the beginning of a new Liturgical year. Essentially this Sunday is the Christian Church's New Year's Eve celebration.

Ok, let me try that again, "Happy New Year!!"

Now you know why I'm dressed to the nines. It is time to celebrate and today is our new years eve Party. I'm sorry I didn't get the word out on the choice of attire, Well, at least you know one of the reasons I'm dressed this way. If I do my job right, the other reason will be come apparent as we progress.

Can anyone tell me what the purpose of celebrating New Years is? What do we do every year?

We celebrate our achievements.

What else do we do?

Create resolutions?

Why? How do we know which resolution to create?

We reflect on the past year.

When we celebrate the New Year, we celebrate our achievements, we reflect on our actions and the resolve to change our actions which caused us to fail or to improve or efforts in the coming year.

Therefore, today as we mark Christ the King Sunday, we review what we as a church have done over the past year to embody Christ's Kingdom here on earth. We celebrate our achievements, mourn our failures, and try to learn from those failures so that we will not repeat them. We also thank God for the many blessings God has rained down upon us as we look forward to the coming New Liturgical Year. How do we do these tasks? We do them by reminding ourselves what kind of king Christ is and what his Kingdom should look like.

Allow me to offer a little history lesson. The celebration of Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new observance (*Wikipedia*, 2010). Initially observed in 1928, the date of the holiday moved around a bit until 1969 when Pope Leo moved it to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, specifically to indicate its importance and to increase the focus upon the holiday.

Like any other high holy day, explaining the theology behind the day and tying it into the events of the rest of the year can be challenging at best. It is not so much that explaining that Christ was King is hard, what is difficult is explaining the difference between what the world's expectations of a king are, and what is expected by God.

My purpose in this sermon is to attempt to explain what kind of King Christ is. It is your job to determine how well you as individuals and we as a church lived up to his example, in other words, as I am preaching, I expect you to celebrate, reflect and resolve.

Did you notice the descriptive language in the scripture readings for today? The passage from *Jeremiah* tells of, "a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. (23:5b)," who "will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven

them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number... ..and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing (23:3-4b).”

Psalm 46 tells us that the expected Messiah “makes wars cease to the end of the earth, breaks the bow, shatters the spear and burns the shield with fire!” and we should not “fear though the earth change, though the mountains shake,... and the nations rage and kingdoms totter.”

And Colossians 1: 15-18 has the clearest description of Christ’s majestic nature:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

These descriptions are of a type of king we can all recognize and follow. Yet, Christ as King has baffled his followers from day one. We wish that the kingdom Christ brings will be one of secular power that ensures the safety of all believers and the creation of a powerful and just (at least for us) society. We want Christ to become the king we desire who smites all our enemies, protects the weak, and puts the heathen in their place at the bottom of society. We want power here in this world, and we want to control others in part because we know what is best for them and for the world. We want a king who dressed in beautiful clothes and is admired by other nations.

However, this vision of Christ’s Kingdom is a distortion of the kind of Kingdom Christ’s promises. Christ’s Kingdom is based upon sacrifice— the humiliating, painful, foolish sacrifice of a man, a king, who became a scapegoat for all of creation and died upon a cross. We can see

the confusion this sacrifice causes for both the world he is transforming by his death and for the Christ's followers who thought they understood what kind of messiah he was. Did you notice that the person who first figured out what the death of Christ represented? Luke 23: 40-43 says:

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.^[b]" Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Can you imagine what that moment of clarity must have been like for this criminal? He knows he is justly condemned. His death upon a cross was conceivable reality from the moment he choose to break the law. He knew what he was doing, and judged the possible consequences worth the prize of whatever it was he did wrong. However, he also KNOWS that Jesus, son of Joseph, did nothing wrong. Jesus is innocent and has been condemned for no good reason. The Criminal sees the reality of the scapegoat before him and in the process sees both the divinity and the majesty present in the dying man beside him.

"Remember me when you come into your kingdom"

Indeed— a kingdom based upon an innocent's death on the cross.

What a vision of a King Christ really offers! Christ's power does not com through living well and embodying the role of judge. He did not come to this world dressed in finery and wearing jewels. Christ's power is not based in this world upon military might, economic power or an impeccable pedigree of royal bluebloods. No, Christ's kingdom is based upon the inconceivable willing sacrifice of an innocent man given to redeem all of creation.

As many of you know, I am a voracious reader. I have a particular passion for science fiction and fantasy novels. One of my current favorite authors is S. M. Stirling (*Wikipedia*, 2010). One of the reasons I like this series so much is because of its ongoing themes of leadership, love and sacrifice in the midst of unimaginable challenges. Or, as clergy like to say, “it’ll preach.” One of ongoing themes in the novels, particularly the Emberverse series, is the concept of the willing sacrifice. Repeatedly in the novels, both major and minor characters sacrifice themselves to save others. These sacrifices range from providing a delaying military action so that other characters can survive to fight another day to two leaders literally fighting a decisive, one-on-one battle so that their people will not need to fight a war. The willingness of these sacrifices empowers the sacrifice to become something bigger than the original action, and transforms both the recipients of the sacrifice and the generations that follow. Stirling writes of the mystical qualities of “a sacrifice that goes willingly,” and often refers to major characters with such terminology. Main characters who are kings and future kings, know their destiny includes struggles, battles and eventually death at a young age, yet these characters embrace their destiny and live their lives with relish and hopeful abandon. These are kings which embody the concept of the willing sacrifice. These are kings modeled after the example of Christ’s kingdom.

It is model we, too, are called to embrace. I do not know if any of us will be called to literally lay down our lives to redeem others, but we are expected to live a life of simplicity, to focus our interests not on accumulating secular signs of wealth and power, but instead to build up treasures in heaven by serving others, by seeking justice for the poor and oppressed and learning how to live with out fear, even in the face of unimaginable challenges.

This is God’s vision of Christ the King.

How are we measuring up?

References

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