Sermons at St Paul’s

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
November 24, 2019
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Getting to November 2020 will try our patience!

No matter what your political stance or beliefs, even if you try really, really hard to stay above the fray, you will be tempted to get angry and frustrated during the coming election marathon. I can almost guarantee it.

Here at St. Paul’s, we will also have our patience tested. We will go through the coming church year with our weekly habits disrupted by scaffolding, by changed worship and community set-ups, excavations for the sewer connection, and redoing the Parish House. I am confident that at some point this coming year I will turn to someone, and say “This is a mess!”

Perhaps it is fitting that our lessons today point us in the direction of chaos and upheaval: Jeremiah speaks of shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep; Paul writes to the Colossians urging them to endure everything with patience; and our Gospel shows us Jesus at his most desolate, on the Cross of his execution.

Is it pure irony that this last Sunday of our church year is called “Christ the King” Sunday? It is, in fact, a very good reminder for us about how to live as grown-up Christians in difficult world. It reminds us that God should be our primary focus, and Jesus will be our ever-present companion in the coming year. It is a call to honor and follow the Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself any idol.”

There is a huge temptation that lies before us in the coming twelve months. We will be tempted to turn our thoughts and hearts away from love, and let the poison of anger, conflict and chaos enter our souls. We will be tempted to turn our backs on each other, to grow into factions
and let evil come among us, as we struggle to cope with construction, disruption, the search process, the non-stop pundits of the media and politics pushing non-stop adrenaline.

And you see, when we allow that to happen – when we forget Jesus and God’s love – we replace God with an idol. We can call those idols political elections, personal comfort and habit, or pride and conflict with our neighbors. These idols also can be subtle, such as smugness or self-righteousness. It does not matter precisely what they are, because they are all idols – all things that put something else between God and our hearts and energies.

Our world is so full of them! And the slippery slope of being interested in something, then keeping up with current events so that we may be responsible citizens and members of St. Paul’s community, and then becoming obsessed with and possessed by those things is ever-present. When our anger becomes self-justifying, instead of being righteous anger at forces that prevent the establishment of the Kingdom of God – we should be aware that we are getting a warning.

The place of the Skull, within sight of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, is the setting of our gospel today. Three crosses stand stark against the overcast sky, marking the apparent triumph of anger, conflict and cruelty over love. Jesus hangs on one, with the mocking sign over his head, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” One other cross is to his right; one to his left. The three crosses bear the weight of three very different people. The first, a criminal full of anger and vindictiveness, derides Jesus. He sneers: “You are supposed to be the Messiah – the Anointed One! So save yourself and us, if you’re so great.” The second criminal is resigned to his fate. But he also is a man who understands justice and mercy. He turns his head to the first speaker and rebukes him: “Are you ready to face God’s judgement? You and I have done wrong and we are being punished. This man has done nothing wrong.”

Then, with words of faith that have echoed through the ages, he turns to Jesus, and asks him: “Will you remember me when you come into your kingdom, Jesus?” Rather than carry anger and regret into the grave with him, this man lets go of the idols that he has put before God by his crimes. He looks at the world with clearer eyes now, knowing that his last hours are
counting down. Tradition calls him “The Good Thief” because at his end, he embraces righteousness and humility. He looks at the crucified Jesus with the sign proclaiming his Kingship at the top of the cross, and his heart melts. Not only has Jesus done nothing wrong, but also he knows that Jesus has been unjustly accused and condemned, all because he is said to be the Messiah. “Will you remember me when you come into your kingdom, Jesus?” he asks. It is a confession. With infinite faith in God, with only love in his heart, Jesus turns to this man and says: “Truly I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.” It is absolution.

So perhaps, it is with every true king, whose whole desire is for the good of his people. True kings have reserves of love and faith, of caring and compassion, which transcend ordinary human behavior – even death on a cross. When we confess our sins and repent, when we join with others who humbly pray, “Jesus, remember me!” we reassert our faithful service among those who seek to bring the Kingdom of God into our world.

Part of the reason why our stewardship season falls at this time of year, is that we are in a transitional time between the end of one Church year, and the start of another. The summer is over and the hard days of winter lie ahead. The boundary between heaven and earth becomes a bit more transparent as we begin our preparation to celebrate the Nativity. This season we call Advent strips us bare of summer’s finery, and asks us to deny our idols and refuse the attention they try to demand of us. During this end of autumn time we ask: What can we give you, God, which will help build your Kingdom? How shall we help you, Jesus, in the coming year?

It all comes down to something so simple -- something you cannot buy on-line, or earn, or demand. It is so simple that it is actually scary to think about without a large dose of humility. It is God’s eternal love. It is Jesus, turning his head gently to gaze at us with eyes of love. It is God’s Spirit, our Comforter, who will carry us through the tribulations and turmoil of the year ahead, and keep us safe.

“Jesus, remember me, when you come into your Kingdom!”

Amen.