

Sermon Proper 29 Year C: "Christ the King" Sunday; Gospel: Luke 23: 33-43

The Alternative Reality

"In the name of the Creator God, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Welcome all to this the last Sunday of the Church Year. Today is the final Sunday of the Season after Pentecost, the longest season of the year. It began back on June 8th. And because green is the color of the season, today is the last day you will see green for a while. I don't dislike the green, but I am ready to move on to something new. Next Sunday everything changes, as it will be the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year. And the color then will be blue.

Today this last Sunday of the church year is also called "Christ the King" Sunday because the readings speak of the kingdom of God, and the reign of Christ as king. This is a relatively recent feast for the church: Pope Pius XI added it to the Roman Catholic Church calendar in 1925, after World War I, stressing Christ's kingship over the power of nationalism. It is not mentioned in the Episcopal calendar year, but is celebrated somewhat "unofficially" in many Episcopal parishes. I don't know about you all, but I am not a fan of the name "Christ the King." As I have pointed out from this pulpit before, I am also not a fan of his portrayal in art as a king dressed in royal clothing sitting on a throne, looking down on his subjects, as we see him behind you in our very own stained glass window above the narthex. As you know from human history, the image of king has been tarnished by the abuse and exploitation of powerful unjust rulers and dictators through the ages. Some of our rulers today would probably love to be recognized as a "King." But as we have seen with our recent "No Kings" protests, also known internationally as "No Dictators" and "No Tyrants" protests, many people clearly think otherwise. Furthermore, from what I can gather about Jesus of Nazareth as we see him in the gospels, I think he may be shaking his head in frustration about being referred to as a "King!" Jesus referred to himself as many things: "friend," "truth," "light," "good shepherd," among others, but he never referred to himself as a King. Yes, he often did talk about the Kingdom of

God, and he described that kingdom in his parables. I realize that some of this is semantics, but if we are going to call God's reign a kingdom, we have to take a look at the nature of this kingship. It is nothing like the world in which we live now. This kingdom of God would be an alternative reality to the dominant reality of our culture. Is it possible?

That is what we will look at today, what this creation including our part in it can look like according to Jesus as we see him and know him in the Gospels. This kingship or reign of God is a place of peace and harmony and goodness, in contrast to what we so often experience in our own lives. Jesus describes it perhaps best in his Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes. He reverses the values of the world: the poor are blessed, the humble lifted, the outcast centered, the mighty are brought low. It is a kingdom of compassion, justice, peace, and healing: the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, outsiders are welcomed. Jesus teaches this as an "already but not yet" reality. It is present now—already here—in the healing, the forgiving, in the loving of neighbor. But its fullness is yet to come. Jesus says the kingdom looks like a table where everyone has a place, a family where all are welcomed, a world reconciled to God and to one another. Can this really happen, we ask? Am I naive to think the world can really look like this?

In Jim's sermon last week, he described for us "a changing world that never changes." I think what he was saying is that our world through the millennia has changed a lot: different styles of government, different cultures, different ways of thinking, evolving technologies, evolving consciousness. Yet through all of these changes one thing has not changed: humanity has never lived out its God-likeness, has never grasped the truth that God is present within each of us, within our very DNA, and consequently has never lived up to our potential as God-bearers to actually usher in this reign of God. Therefore the promised Kingdom of God has never been fully realized. Oh, it is here, and we do get glimpses of it. We see it in every act of compassion, of mercy, of forgiveness, of love. We see in feeding the hungry with our Thanksgiving food donations, of every visit to the sick

by our Caring Committee, of every donation of clothing to the Clothesline ministry. This is the Kingdom alive. And yet, there is the possibility of so much more than just these glimpses. What if this way of life were to become the norm? Once again, is this naive? Is there an alternative reality to the one that lies right in front of us? A reality partially hidden yet still there? I think there is.

Walter Brueggemann was a biblical scholar, theologian, teacher, and prolific author who wrote more than a hundred books on theology and biblical criticism. His specialty was the Hebrew Bible, with an emphasis on the prophets and the Psalms. The prophet about whom he wrote most was Jeremiah, appropriate for today's Old Testament reading. He passed away recently, on June 5th this year, at the age of 92. He used a method called rhetorical analysis for biblical interpretation, which was at odds with the traditional method called historical criticism. He saw God in action through the rhetoric and lives of the people in scripture, and further stressed how God is still actively speaking to us today in scripture. The themes he found God talking about are liberation, freedom, justice, inclusivity, among others. His most famous book was The Prophetic Imagination which was published in 1978 and sold more than a million copies. It remains a classic still used in seminaries. In that book Brueggemann shows how through the biblical prophets God called the people to imagine a different world, a world with what he called an alternative reality different from the dominant reality of the culture. He once said "It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination to keep on conjuring and proposing future alternatives to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one." By "king" he meant the strongest voice of power within the culture. We could call it empire. The prophet's job is to energize this imagination, to help people see beyond whatever the current power of the culture is to God's kingdom of justice and peace. He was critical of American consumerism, militarism, and nationalism like we saw in Nazi Germany and which threatens us still. His alternative reality was a world of peace, of harmony, of inclusivity, of love. Sounds like the Kingdom Jesus describes, don't

you think? Prophetic imagination can be defined as “seeing an alternative to the one that lies in front of us.” I see it as the Kingdom of God that Jesus describes so many times in his teachings and especially in his parables. Of course living this way of the Kingdom can be dangerous. It certainly was for Jesus. He was murdered on a cross because of it, because of the way he lived it.

We had our annual clergy conference at Camp Beckwith a few weeks ago, and our guest speaker was Labron Chance. Labron is also a biblical scholar and great teacher who taught our class scripture for two years. At the clergy conference he talked about Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination and how it brings the biblical message to life for us the readers. It makes clear to us God’s call to live out of this alternative reality, out of this different way of life, this way which is at contrast to the way of the dominant culture around us, the culture of greed, of fear, of control, of grasping for power, of racism, of genocide. It helps us to imagine an alternative reality to the dominant culture—a different world shaped not by empire, oppression, or despair, but by God’s justice, mercy, and hope. It is the same reality that Jesus is describing as the Kingdom of God.

This Kingdom is the alternative reality that Brueggemann talks about, and it is not just some future reality that awaits us after death. It is a reality already here, although mostly hidden. We see that in today’s Gospel. Jesus, being mocked by onlookers, nailed to a cross, bleeding in pain, struggling to breath, tells those who are killing him, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And then these words to the thief on a cross beside him, the one who affirms Jesus’ innocence, “You are in paradise today—right now—even amidst your sufferings.” While himself hanging near death on the cross, what we see from Jesus is forgiveness and compassion. His is not a kingdom of oppressive power, but rather one of compassion and love, and it is here in our midst today. I will paraphrase from the words of Frederick Buechner: If we will only open our eyes to see and our ears to hear and our hearts to know, we will find that this Kingdom, this alternative reality in the sense of holiness, goodness, truth, and beauty, is as

close as breathing, and is crying out to be born both within ourselves and our world. We would know it is what we hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name. It is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it. Yes, it is indeed alive and pervasive among us in this life right now.

Have you ever looked around at the world—the violence in our streets, division in our communities and our country, greed that crushes the poor, loneliness and suffering, and thought—probably helplessly and without hope—this is just how things are—and we start to believe nothing will ever change? It is difficult to imagine a world where this alternative reality—this reign of God—can become the dominant reality, isn't it? Surely nothing about the current condition of our world provides us with much comfort or hope. But having a prophetic imagination can help, a faith that this alternative reality will in the end prevail, because it is what God has always intended. Therein lies our hope. We have to hold fast to it. If we the faithful to God lose that hope, then I'm afraid all is lost. The church today perhaps more than ever is being called to live prophetically, and by that I mean to actually embody God's alternative reality in how we worship, how we serve, how we love, how we live. How can we the church and as individuals be different from the world's systems of power? How can we the church community become a sign of hope—a space where compassion, equity, and generosity are practiced daily, where the Kingdom of God is here, where truth and freedom and love reigns? Let us dare to imagine this alternative world as God intends it to be. Imagine that! The Kingdom of God the reality.

