

## An Innocence

Wayne Waibel – 11/20/2022

Next Sunday the season of Advent begins. This then is the final Sunday in the Christian calendar. It is referred to as the Reign of Christ, or Christ the King Sunday. Our lectionary weaves from the Benedictus or “Song of Zechariah” – John the Baptist’s father... through Jeremiah’s prophesy to the scattered Israelites that God will install a shepherd to gather the people once again to their promised land... to the exhortations of Paul’s letter to the Colossians that they embrace the teachings of Christ alone... and finally the crucifixion narrative in Luke.

At first blush it would seem that the crucifixion is better understood when bracketed in the Easter story, however, our salvation as a people and Christ’s reign as our beloved King actually began upon His suffering and death on the cross. Without that scene – there would be no redemption.

So it’s entirely fitting and proper that we celebrate the end of our liturgical year and the beginning of our Savior’s glorious reign on this day – in this place – with this gathering of His children.

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It's hard to say which is the most egregious offense committed at Calvary. The indifference of the crowd who simply watched. The mocking of the rulers who sneered at Him to save Himself if He was indeed the Christ. The ridiculing soldiers who cast lots for His garments, or the petty thief who indignantly challenged Him to save all that were being executed that day.

The point that Luke was striving for in this section of his narrative was simply this – Jesus was innocent. He had been tortured and was now being crucified despite the fact that He was completely innocent. And this was not lost on the second criminal who also proclaimed Christ's innocence, and asked only that he be remembered.

This simple exchange is what forms the backdrop for a most elegant promise; "Today you will be with Me in paradise." And so begins "Thy kingdom come..."

The criminal has essentially implored Jesus with the same common hope that each of us holds in the depth of our hearts. He is asking Jesus, "Do not remember me according to my wickedness, but remember me according to Your goodness." And Jesus in His response is affirming that indeed He is close to us, even in our distance from God.

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It's hard to grasp the redemptive nature of our beliefs at times like these. Our steady diet of political turmoil – famine – global warming – violence – injustice – mayhem and disharmony, all factor into a worldview that seems impossible to reconcile.

Now you can bury your head in the sand and adopt a not here – not now – not in my corner of the world mentality and press on as though none of this affects you, but that only serves to illuminate the lesser problems as well.

We are called to the underlying issues that play into the brokenness of the world. It is in those pinions we can do our very best work. We are a caring people, with long held beliefs in the greater goodness of humankind.

Ours is not a world more destitute than our predecessors. Things may happen at an accelerated pace, but that just serves to reinforce our responsibility to continually reorient our lives. This is not a static calling. We embody a dynamic, imaginative ministry.

The reign of Christ is the reign of peace. Our King hangs from a cross and asks His Father God to forgive the very people who nailed Him to that cross and now stand humiliating Him as He draws His last breath. Our King's last words to another human – a common thief – were, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Our King is no ordinary King.

Jesus spent His life teaching about the kingdom of God. The dynamic life of the Word of God whenever it is uttered speaks to the possibilities of the present, as well as the hopes of the future. The Pharisees and Sadducees were so caught up in the there and then of their interpretations that they completely disregarded the here and now of what Christ was saying.

In fact – the teachings of Jesus were so unlike anything they had encountered previously that – to them – this Jesus needed to be silenced. When you speak truth to power, it usually results in discomfort for them – which can mean danger for you. But Jesus was not at all concerned for His own welfare. The impoverished of humanity was His focus.

The multitudes that followed Him must have been overwhelmed by His vision of the kingdom of God. A kingdom where a wayward son would be welcomed home with a joyous celebration after he had squandered away his inheritance in a far-off land. A kingdom that not only included the poor and the marginalized, but elevated them to a status that violated all the norms of a world that ignored them completely.

And this kingdom of which Jesus spoke is as relevant today as it was in the beginning of His reign. To think of first century Christians having access to this kingdom carries a transitory awe that eclipses any modern technologic discovery or medical breakthrough if only in the sense that the language of blessing is grounded in certainty.

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We are not strong in ourselves but only as children of God. This is not weakness. To rely on God is a blessing and a saving grace. It is in Him that we live and move and have our being, and our efforts are well placed.

The salvific conquest of Jesus over death and sin liberates us to an abundant life. No matter the time we spend on this planet – it is time well spent if it is directed toward the God of our fathers. We may count ourselves blessed even if the only good thing we ever do is to remain a worthy vessel of God's incarnate grace.

Scripture reminds us that our part in all of this is as children of the living God. The glory of the reign of Christ the King is not only His unending love for us, but also the fulfillment of God's magnificent creation. He is our God, and we are His people. Always and forever.

The trials and strife of our current life are little more than ripples on a pond in the grand scheme of things. For we have as our hope a promise that even we – no matter how sinful – regardless of station in life – despite pitiful efforts toward righteousness – even we - will one day join our Lord and Savior in paradise. Glory to God in the highest. Amen.