

20 November 2016

Last Sunday after Pentecost/ "Christ the King" Sunday

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

One of the things I have enjoyed about St. Michael's is that preaching here is a dialogue. Even though it's not conversational in the moment on Sundays, frequently afterward or later during the week someone will tell me "You said so-and-so, and that made me think about an article I read..." You preach to me, sharing a story or a "for instance" from your own life and experience. Together we explore what it means to be Gospel folk, to be people of the Way of Jesus in this place and time, even when it's hard or scary or strange.

In just that way, someone shared some words with me earlier this week. I want to share them with all of you this morning. The author, Parker Palmer, is a Quaker author, educator, and activist from Madison, Wisconsin. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, he says:

The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure;
The deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair;
The deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring:
These are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings.
If we refuse to hold them in the hopes of living
without doubt, despair, or pain,
We will find ourselves living
without faith, hope, and love.

I have been convinced for some time that when we grieve (a death, a loss, a disappointment) we do so in exactly the same proportion that we have loved. If we didn't love, we would not grieve. To avoid grief by avoiding love is simply too high a price.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost. In some branches of the Church it is called "Christ the King" Sunday. *The Book of Common Prayer* uses no such title, although our scriptures appointed for today do follow that imagery.

I've always had a bit of a struggle with the language of "king" to talk about God. Such description employs a secular metaphor which locates power and domination very much "up there/out there", somewhere far off, removed and distant. It defines God as "Above (and perhaps disdainful of) the ordinary", which is not helpful for most of humanity. Jesus talks a lot about "the kingdom (or the dominion) of Heaven" but consistently refuses kingship and kingdom language when people around him try to drag it in, instead subverting it by insisting that "my kingdom is not from this world."

To borrow from one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*: "I do not think that word means what you think it means."

It does not mean a palace, or a crown, or a throne.

It does not mean power taken by force and kept by fear and domination.

It looks like a naked man, bloody and broken, hanging on a cross.

It looks like an empty cave, with a stone pushed aside, and some pieces of cloth laying on the ground.

It looks like a group of friends, who go running into the streets with hearts on fire, to tell everyone they meet that death does not have the last word.

When we speak of Jesus as King, the word itself is subverted. The kingship of Christ is this: that there is no part of the human condition that he does not experience. From the indignity and uncertainty of beginning life as a political refugee, the child of an unmarried couple in flight from their ancestral home, to a death of pain, humiliation, and abandonment as a threat to the powers and principalities of the empire. All this he has known in himself, in his own flesh and blood and bone. In love, and for love, he offers himself for the sake of the beloved ones—the cosmos itself and every one of us in it. He avoids nothing, refuses nothing, and so includes all things, all that is, in the economy of redemption.

The coming of the Magi in search of “the king of the Jews”; the heavenly proclamation at the Jordan: “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased”; the Resurrection on the third day and the Ascension forty days later—all these are announcements of this strange, unworldly “kingship” toward which Jesus himself remains consistently ambiguous.

I think he knew that we’d have trouble understanding the difference. Lord knows the disciples certainly did.

For them, and for us now, twenty-one centuries later and on the other side of the globe, to say or sing that “Jesus is king” is to make a profound statement of loyalty. A political statement, in fact. One that flies in the face of all the ordinary expectations about who and what “kings” are about.

Because if Jesus is king, then Caesar is not.

If Jesus is king,

then the current occupant of the palace, or the White House, or the Governor’s mansion, is not.

If Jesus is king,

then the dollars in my bank account, however many or few, are not.

Nor are the number of degrees hanging on the office wall;

nor are the relationships—the family members and friends we can claim as “Ours”;

none of the things we collect and gather to ourselves, to make ourselves feel safe and secure.

“Those who lose their life for my sake” Jesus says, “and for the sake of the Good News, will find it.”

We follow him, we enter in to that strange and paradoxical dominion of God to which he points, in word and behavior, over and over again, by giving over our own need to dominate, or control, or win at any cost. By trusting that indeed, the way of the Cross (Head to heaven, feet on the ground, arms outstretched, heart open and unguarded) is the way of Life.

Benedictine nun and hymnwriter Dolores Dufner took a hymntune known for its triumphant, even militaristic associations, and wrote words to that tune which tell another story altogether. Hear, then, the poet:

O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our king?

What royal face have you revealed whose praise the church would sing?

*Aspiring not to glory's height, to power, wealth, and fame,
you walked a different, lowly way, another's will your aim.*

*You came, the image of our God, to heal and to forgive,
to shed your blood for sinners' sake that we might rise and live.
To break the law of death you came, the law of love to bring:
a different rule of righteousness, a different kind of king.*

*Though some would make their greatness felt and lord it over all,
you said the first must be the last and service be our call.
O Christ, in workplace, church, and home, let none to power cling;
for still, through us, you come to serve, a different kind of king.*

*You chose a humble human form and shunned the world's renown;
you died for us upon a cross with thorns your only crown.
But still, beyond the span of years, our glad hosannas ring,
for now at God's right hand you reign, a different kind of king!*

Delores Dufner, OSB, b. 1939, © 2001, 2003 GIA Publications