

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
LUKE 19:29-38

Sermon – November 25, 2007

Preparing for the Kingdom of God

We gather here this morning in the cozy after-glow of Thanksgiving – and enjoying a break from the rest of the week, whether work or shopping or not enough time or maybe too much time. Here, today, we focus on The Big Picture, for this is called “Christ the King Sunday.” Before we start to remember Christ’s humble birth in a manger in Bethlehem, we remember that Christ **is** “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

That phrase forms the climax of a rousing chorus in Handel’s “Messiah.” Shouting that phrase, however, could have gotten you arrested – and maybe executed – during the pagan days of the Roman Empire, when the motto was “*Caesar is Lord, Caesar is King of Kings.*”

To say *Christ is King*, that *Jesus is Lord* is to say that *no* emperor, King or president is – and neither should employers or merchants or money have first place in our hearts or in our allegiances, either.

To proclaim Christ as King is also to recognize that the world is *not yet* fully under his lordship, which is why, in the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s will *is* done perfectly and all the time in heaven, but God’s will is *not yet* done perfectly and all the time on earth. As we all have noticed.

There still are war, terrorism, poverty, environmental degradation, injustice, disease, racism and a host of other evils plaguing the world.

As individuals, we have some choices. We can join with the forces of darkness and see what short term gains we can garner from them before they exact the terrible and inevitable price from us of our souls. We can try to merely look out for ourselves and perhaps those closest to us, playing an inevitably losing game against hordes of evil forces. We can give up and drown in our cynicism and depression.

Or we can draw hope and courage from the man whose grisly death is memorialized in the Stations of the Cross on the walls of this church, a penniless Jewish carpenter and rabbi who was crushed by the mightiest Empire of the ancient world.

Hope and courage from this? Yes, indeed. That great empire is history, as all countries eventually will be, while Jesus of Nazareth is alive and triumphant, and Christians today choose to align themselves with him as they await his return, in the words of the Nicene Creed, when “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end.”

It takes faith, naturally, to believe in God, faith to believe that Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and a second chance to all who turn to him, faith that the Holy Spirit offers awesome coaching in all aspects of life to those who seek God, perhaps especially faith that the Christian church is a chosen instrument of God to help prepare the way for the Kingdom of God.

Because, let's face it, the Christian church – and individual Christian churches – have messed up again and again. That's one good reason why a lot of people tell pollsters, "I really admire Jesus but I'm really turned off by the Church." Jesus was – and is – **inclusive**, inviting all sorts of people to follow him, but not all churches are inclusive.

For example, Jesus told his followers to "make disciples of *all* nations", but some churches took "all nations" to mean "both England and Scotland" – perhaps thinking that the Kingdom of God would be as segregated as those churches were.

I don't think so.

And one church I knew well as recently as the 1970's required its (all male) ushers to dress in white gloves and tails, as though they were going to a ball at Buckingham Palace and expected only people who also might be invited to such a ball to come to church.

I don't think so.

I seem to recall that Jesus was a carpenter and his first followers were fishermen...not quite the fancy palace types. I have a hunch that the Kingdom of God will include people from all walks of life, incomes and educational levels. That certainly was Jesus' approach, and after all, *he's* in charge of the invitation list.

And some churches don't know what to do with people who don't fit their idea of the age or condition of people they expect, from the churches which did not make *me* welcome when I was 22 years old and single, to those that can't tolerate a peep from a young child, to those which are as inaccessible as a mountaintop to people who have physical disabilities. I wonder – in those churches, do the Gospel stories about Jesus taking children in his arms and blessing them, about Jesus welcoming those with disabilities and healing them and welcoming all ages into his fellowship ever get read, understood and lived?

Sadly, *I don't think so.*

Some churches are inclusive; some, however, have awfully specific ideas of who they *will* welcome. Some churches are not good at welcoming first time visitors, or people who are new in town, or single parent families, or people who are of a different ethnic group than the dominant one in that church, or immigrants, or multi-generational extended families, or committed same-sex couples, or divorced or divorced-and-remarried people, recovering alcoholics, or mixed-race couples, or families with adopted children...did I leave anybody out? Goodness, will the Kingdom of God be limited just to established cliques of people, possibly ones that look like a 1950's TV sitcom?

I don't think so.

So what's needed to reach the people who love Jesus but who aren't part of a church yet? Maybe it is a church with members who have experienced the pain of not being made to feel welcome and included in some *other* Christian communities, and who are determined, therefore, *to truly welcome not only each other but all newcomers in a bond of Christian unity*. If *Christ* is the King and not stereotypes and prejudices, maybe that should be the approach.

Sounds like a plan. Know any church like that?

I think so. Sounds like us.

And maybe this should also be a church which focuses more and more on helping hurting people in the world *outside* its walls *as well* as caring for its own members.

A church that, say, every month shows up to feed the hungry at Elijah's Promise Soup Kitchen in New Brunswick, every winter shows up for two weeks to help staff the overflow of the Men's Shelter in New Brunswick, and which, over the last 17 years, has collected over *six tons* of food for the Franklin Food Bank alone, in addition to that given to South Brunswick's Food Bank.

A church that, say, raised almost as much money for Church World Services' annual CROP Walk against world hunger *as all the other churches in South Brunswick combined*.

A church whose *middle school students* are leading the way with efforts like raising money for the families who are staying in Ronald McDonald House in New Brunswick while their children are in the hospital, and raising money for an orphanage and school for A.I.D.S. orphans in Nairobi, Kenya. That effort's as American as...apple pie.

Maybe it would take a church which helps families from shelters for the survivors of domestic violence resettle into new homes with furniture, household goods and new clothing, no strings attached. A church which offers community college scholarship for women in such shelters. A church which for four years in a row sends members 8,000 miles to help train people they'd never met how to cope better with the plagues of alcoholism, drug abuse and HIV/A.I.D.S.

No church is perfect; perfection is what heaven is for, and what the Kingdom of God will be. But perhaps, Christians can prepare for the coming Kingdom of God by keeping an open mind about who Jesus might be inviting to join the party, and welcoming anyone who wants to follow Jesus and be part of this team who is trying to make the world a little better.

Maybe, Charlie and Angel picked a pretty good community in which to start their lives in Christ this morning. I confess to being prejudiced in favor of this community. If you can find a better church, join it. If you like the sounds of this one and aren't a member yet, check us out.

But let's all remember that, in the words of Paul's Letter to the Colossians, it is in *Christ* that "all things hold together," not in any church alone. Finally, in Paul's words to us all, "*May you be made strong* with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light."

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ