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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/21/2010, Christ the King Sunday
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:33-43

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 23:5, RSV)

Let me share a story with you from the springtime newsletter for *Bread for the World*. You might have heard of *Bread for the World*. It is a fine Christian movement to end hunger. It was founded by a Lutheran clergyman named Art Simon, who served Trinity Lutheran Church on the Lower East Side of our town.

The story is about Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, one of our city's mayors. He served during the Great Depression and World War II. The story goes like this:

In January 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the city's poorest ward. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself.

A tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges.

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions -- \$10 or 10 days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. "Here is the \$10 fine which I now remit; and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her grandchildren, 50 cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some 70 petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York city policemen, each of

whom had just paid 50 cents, gave the mayor a standing ovation. (Story told by Brennan Manning in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.)¹

One day, you and I are going to give Jesus a standing ovation, for he is Christ the King, who, as Jeremiah puts it, “shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Aye, and not only you and I, but also millions upon millions of folks, even this whole wide world shall salute Jesus. It shall be as St. Paul promises. One day, all people will be gathered under the gentle and glorious rule of Christ the King:

⁹Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: ¹⁰That at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; ¹¹And that *every* tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, KJV)

The problem with this world’s kings heretofore is that they are too much like the kings of whom Jeremiah complains in our First Lesson. In the previous chapter, Chapter 22, Jeremiah had been critiquing the sequence of kings who had served during his long ministry. The kings seemed to come and go, and none of them were any great shakes.

Then in our chapter, Chapter 23, it is as if Jeremiah gives up in despair or frustration, quits his process of evaluating individual kings by name, and instead, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, contemplates a *new kind of king*. He laments the kinds of kings Judah has known for too long, for all too long. Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim -- miserable mixtures of good and bad at best, mostly bad. A plague on them all! What ails them is that they are not good shepherds of the people. In fact, they seem not even to grasp that to be a “king” is to be a “shepherd.” It is to be someone who takes care of the flock. To be a king is to be a minister of the people, not a plunderer of them.

Take Jehoiakim, for example. He seems to have worked his own people as if they were slaves in order to make himself a fancy house and hardly paid them for their labors. Listen to Jeremiah blast him:

Disaster for the man who builds his house without uprightness,
his upstairs rooms without fair judgement,
who makes his fellow-man work for nothing,
without paying him his wages,
who says, “I shall build myself a spacious palace
with airy upstairs rooms,”
who makes windows in it,
panels it with cedar, and paints it vermilion.

¹ Bread for the World, April-May 2010

Are you more of a king
because of your passion for cedar?
...[You] have eyes and heart for nothing but your own interests, for
shedding innocent blood and perpetrating violence and oppression.
(Jeremiah 22:13-17, NJB)

Glad to say, in our passage Jeremiah is permitted to look beyond this world's present kings to a true king, one he calls "a righteous Branch" from David -- one who shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

But there is a crucial matter concerning such a king. It is the matter of his heart and constancy of character. If every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth is to bow before this king, then this king shall be invested with an awful lot of power. But, alas, as Lord Acton warned, "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Such an unchallenged king might be tempted to start serving himself rather than the people. Especially, we should hope that this king is trustworthy, with a heart that is continually good, if he reigns henceforth, ages upon ages, world without end.

Such a one is Jesus Christ. He is trustworthy. He is worthy of being Christ the King. He is incorruptible. His character has been revealed all the way to the Cross.

Earlier this week I preached at the funeral for our former member Anne Fischer. Anne lived to be eighty-eight years old. Hers was a grateful heart. Not only had she been blessed with good people in her life, but she was mindful of her blessings. She spoke of the people she loved continually. And so, for my funeral text, I found myself focusing on the great testimony of Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi:

¹⁶And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: ¹⁷Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.
(Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth spoke of a determined love. Romantic words can hardly equal her devotion to her mother-in-law:

...whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge

Indeed, she can imagine no limit to her love *except* for death itself:

...the LORD do so to me, and more also, if *ought but death* part thee and me.

“Ought but death,” she says. “Shame on me if anything less than death should separate me from thee.”

This is a mighty love, I say. But you and I know of an even greater love. We know a man who would not let even death separate him from those he loved. If they must die, then he is determined to dive right into death in order to rescue them. He was willing to die with them, even to the degree of a horrible death on a cross. His love for you, for me, was so fierce, so strong, that he could declare to us, “not even death shall separate me from thee.” I speak of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Against sin, death, and the devil, Jesus shouted out, “These people are mine!” And for our sake, his dying words were, “Father, forgive.” It was just like him to turn to the dying thief and to comfort him as we read in this morning’s Gospel:

⁴³And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43, RSV)

When we ponder our vast world, with its daily rotation before the sun, I bet there are liturgies going on at all times. And so, the Lord’s Prayer is being prayed continually, along with its Second Petition: “Thy kingdom come.” Thus, a continual cry rises up to God from earth that Christ the King should come again. Soon!

What does this mean -- this prayer for the Kingdom? Here is Luther’s answer from his *Small Catechism*:

What does this mean?

Answer: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come *to us*.

How is this done?

Answer: When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both here in time and hereafter forever.

Luther makes a key distinction here. It is one thing to believe in Christ the King. It is something else, and something most needful, for us to acknowledge Christ as *our* king, even now.

To be a Christian is to be part of the vanguard for Christ the King. It is to be in a foremost position in Christ’s Kingdom, living for him even now in advance of his return in power and in glory.

And this means different things for us depending on what side of the line we are occupying. Jeremiah prophesied a Branch of David who would establish justice:

...and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice

and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 23:5, RSV)

Therefore, if we be unjust, if we be the ones who are being unfair in the world, then to be among the vanguard of Christ the King means that we must repent and turn from our injustice. On the other hand, if we be the *victims* of injustice, being the vanguard for Christ the King means that we are invited to hope and grace that goes beyond the understanding of those who persecute us.

A brief word about both sides of the line:

It is amazing and grievous how unjust we human beings can be to one another. There are the great official deeds of injustice like that of Pilate of old, whose betrayal of justice led Jesus to the Cross where we find him in this morning's Gospel Lesson. "I find no fault in the man," declared Pilate:

Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man. (Luke 23:4, KJV)

Three times in Luke's Gospel, Pilate declared Jesus innocent, yet delivered Jesus to be crucified nonetheless:

²⁰Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus; ²¹but they shouted out, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²²A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him." ²³But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted. (Luke 23:20-24, RSV)

History is full of tyranny's and official injustice, including the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries after Christ.

But besides these official betrayals of justice, there are our personal sinful deeds toward one another. How can it be that a husband and wife can live together in holy marriage for twenty years, and then one simply turn away, abandoning the other, leaving the children? How can employers treat their workers as machines, without regard for their weariness or responsibilities back home? How can thieves and cheats rip off the vulnerable?

Well, if you are part of a gang of thieves, then turn away from that gang. And if your thieving colleagues object, saying, "But we have a good thing going here. We are getting away with it!" then answer, "No, we do not have a good thing going, and we are not going to get away with it, for Christ the King is coming and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land."

On the other hand, if you are a victim of injustice, hold your head high with hope. Recently in Monday evening Psalm class, we admired Psalm 73's words of yearning for God:

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

²⁶My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever...

²⁸But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works. (Psalm 73:25-28, KJV)

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.” These are the words of a soul that seeks God above all else. But these can also be the words of one who has been abandoned on earth, who is surrounded by opponents and enemies, but who nonetheless has hope, because even if he has no one upon earth to help, still he has Someone in heaven, and that one is coming again.

I mean Jesus Christ the King. This is the man worthy of being King forever! He is this world’s true king. Let him be your king even now. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.