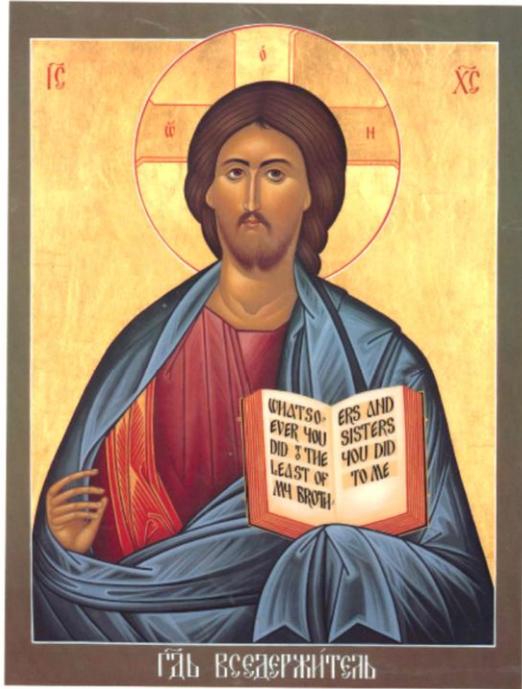


Christ Church in Harwich Port, MA

Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King 2013 Judith Davis, Rector

[Jeremiah 23:1-6; *Song of Zechariah* (Luke 1:68-79), Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43.]

“Blessed be the God of Israel who comes to set us free and raises up new hope for us: A Branch from David’s tree.” This is from the paraphrase of the *Song of Zechariah* we said/sang earlier in this service. Zechariah continues about his infant son John the Baptist: “My child, as prophet of the Lord you will prepare the way, to tell God’s people they are saved from sin’s eternal sway. Then shall God’s mercy from on high shine forth and never cease, to drive away the gloom of death and lead us into peace.”



Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, for next Sunday begins Advent. The Gospel lesson from Luke seems misplaced because it’s when Jesus and the two thieves are put on their crosses to die. One thief who realizes who Jesus is says to him, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Instead of saying nothing or saying “I have no kingdom,” Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” This is the only time in the Gospels when Jesus uses the word “Paradise.” Jesus’ sacrifice of his mortal life on the cross was for the redemption of the world and the world included the thief next to Jesus. But while the thief may have imagined that royal palace where Jesus would reign in glory and overturn the Roman Empire, we know that the kingdom Jesus meant was a very different one from that image.

Jesus made clear in his brief ministry that the kingdom was like a mustard seed or like treasure hidden in a field or yeast hidden in dough. He always made clear that the kingdom had to do with how the faithful ministered to the least of God's people, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the marginalized.

Paul made clear that those who are "in Christ" have a security and a hope that is for right now and not just off on some other shore. Jesus said the kingdom is within as well. Jesus especially wanted people to realize they had access to the kingdom by the way they live and how they serve others. Jesus did not want the disciples then and now to sit by and wait for the *eschaton* when the second coming would occur; he wanted them to know the kingdom is also here and now. He wanted people to live in the ways of the kingdom or God's commonwealth of peace and justice *now* by embodying lives of *shalom* right now, today. Jesus reminds the people that the ones who visited the sick and prisoners, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and otherwise helped the needy were the ones who had ministered to him and they would be the ones to whom God would say, "Come, you blessed ones, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Instead of a psalm today we have the *Song of Zechariah*, that great song he sings at the birth of his son John the Baptist who will prepare the way for his cousin Jesus. In a sense all of us share John's ministry. We too in some ways go before a faithful reception of Jesus Christ, preparing the way for him by our words and actions. We, like John, point people away from ourselves and toward Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Salvation and redemption are major themes in Luke. However, Zechariah reminds us here that we celebrate them not because we deserve God's rescue, but because of the "tender mercy of our God," who sends the

messenger to prepare the way for the Incarnate Word of God to come and bring the brightness of God's light into a troubled world.

The image of Christ in glory like the icon on your bulletin cover, was popular in Eastern and Russian Orthodox spirituality. When a group of us went to the Russian icon museum in Clinton not long ago, we saw a number of icons of Christ in Glory, Christ the *Pantokrator*, or ruler of all as he is called in Orthodox Christianity. We see him holding the Bible opened to the passage in Matthew 25 known as the great judgment passage when Jesus says, "Whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me."

As we deal with what we call "last things" at the end of the liturgical year, we also deal with the coming of Advent. The passage of scripture from Jeremiah offers us a window on Advent in these words: "The days are surely 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). We interpret "righteous Branch" as Jesus who came into the world as God's Son on that first Advent and whom we believe will come in the Second Coming to redeem the world, but as all our scriptures reveal to us, these advents of Jesus are not the ones to wait for, for we are called to live out the gospel imperatives to care for the least and lost of God's people, so that in our own time, we can effect some of that peaceable kingdom of God's *shalom* and make the world a little better for those we meet.

Oh, I believe in that *eschaton*, that time to come when all of us will be with the thief on the cross and all those we love in God's final reign of justice-love. I believe that Jesus has prepared a place for us to live in joy with him forever. I don't feel called to live waiting on Jesus to come back and make things right. Things will be right according to Jesus when we all live in peace and justice and love and care about each other. Then the wolf will lie

down with the lamb and we will study war no more. We have a long way to go for that peaceable kingdom to reign in our world, but each of us has a part to play in doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. Jesus is not coming back, if you will, to be just another king, but his reign has to do with a new order characterized by new life, hope, grace and love.

I think the times that bring me up short about what I believe about the first and second coming of Christ, the reign of Christ as all-mighty, *Pantokrator*, and the mansion Christ is preparing for me, are those times of holding the hand of loved ones who are dying. I sat with Ann Patterson recently the day before she died, holding her hand, stroking her hair, sitting with her and her daughter, giving her last rites and thinking about what ever heaven is. This week I sat with Anne's mother Margaret Gilson in her last days. She was mostly present and kept saying over and over, "I'm scared. I want water. I'm dizzy. I'm falling." When I said, "Are you afraid of dying," she said, "no." When I said "you're safe, you're in bed, you won't fall, here's some water, suck on the straw, you'll be OK," I wasn't sure that worked for her. She said she wasn't afraid of death since it's a part of life, but I imagine she's afraid of dying and how that will be. I told her that nothing scary would happen to her and that she wouldn't be in pain. Anne told her that Dick (that's Anne's father) would be waiting for her to come home. And as time seemed frozen this past week, I pondered yet again what Jesus meant when he said to the thief, "today you will be with me in paradise." Paradise, that place where there is no pain or sorrow, but only life everlasting and wonderful—paradise as well as place that is within us—that place that when we let go enough of our own selves, we can empty enough to receive the great peace and love of God that empowers us to try as best we can to change the world order of the empire—of those things in the world that have power over us and others. That we could offer a cup of water to a thirsty soul like the actual water I kept offering to Margaret. We are the ones who hold the cups of water for a

world thirsty for faith, a world thirsty for meaning, a world thirsty for purpose, a world thirsty for peace. I believe that God welcomes us to that home where we will live forever with God, even though we do not know that place as we find ourselves in *chronos* time, but in the *kairos* time of God's reign, we will find that peace, that haven, that world of love, and it begins here and now as we offer that peace, that haven, that world of love to those we meet along the journey of our lives. Margaret Gilson is one of God's saints and I have journeyed with her for almost 18 of her almost 90 years. I'm sure God is preparing a place for her as we celebrate this time of Christ the King.

In this last week of the season after Pentecost, let us think of how we minister to the least and lost of the people of the world and how we can offer the proverbial water of the springs of life to those who are thirsty. I'm always reminded of that great quartet of the oratorio, *Elijah* by Mendelssohn, as they sing "O! Come everyone that thirsteth, O come to the waters; come unto Him, hear, and your souls shall live for ever!" (Isaiah 49:1, 3). Just like the water I held for Margaret, the waters of life are ours too share with a thirsty world. Let us look for ways to serve as this season ends and we prepare for Christ coming to reign in our hearts forever. Perhaps it is fitting that Thanksgiving Day comes between this end of the Season after Pentecost and Advent. Let us be thankful then, this week. Let us remember in our gratitude that the God who has given good gifts has more good gifts to give.

Our scripture passages for today remind us from Jeremiah that God will gather the remnant home and will raise up shepherds who will make the community safe. The canticle that Zechariah sings from the first chapter of Luke is of the new rule of God in Jesus. Twice he affirms God's gift of mercy: "God has shown mercy" (verse 72) and "By the tender mercies of our God" (verse 78). That mercy comes as forgiveness whereby the world

is restored to healthy possibility and to life with God. Paul's lyrical affirmation in Colossians is the news that we are "transferred" to a new governance (verse 13), have forgiveness (verse 14), and "have peace" through the self-giving of God (verse 20).

The gospel narrative in Luke 23 features Jesus on the cross, about to be executed by the empire as an enemy of the state. He is mocked by his executioners; he is derided by one of his fellow inmates. In an extraordinary act of contradiction, Jesus responds with forgiveness. Jesus responds to his fellow inmate by a promise of paradise in time to come. Jesus refuses the rules of the empire. He breaks the vicious cycles of violence, making new life possible. In him we have the new shepherd of Jeremiah, the mercy of Zechariah, and reconciliation of Paul -- all come to effective visibility. The world is now the new venue of tender mercy that nullifies the force of death among us. (Walter Bruggemann, in *Sojourner's* magazine, November 2010, "God's Reign Cracks into Our World").

And so, let us end this liturgical year and begin a new one committed to offering shalom to our world and caring more and more for others and praising God for all our blessings and believing in the reign of God's love forever.

Let us pray:

O God, let this King's cross become the shape of our lives; let this Lord's compassion form our hearts; let this Shepherd's embrace welcome us to Paradise. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen (From *Prayers for Sunday and Seasons, Year C*, Peter J. Scagnelli, LTP, 1992).