

Scripture Readings for Sunday November 24th 2019

Luke 23:33-43 (NIV)

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Colossians 1:9b-20 (NIV)

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Sermon: An Unlikely King

Today is “Christ the King Sunday,” the last day in the Christian calendar before we begin a new liturgical year with a time of waiting – with Advent. It is an acknowledgement that the baby’s birth we celebrated *last* Christmas is *now* the resurrected and ascended King of All Creation. The Christian calendar, then, takes us on a journey of discovery through the life of Jesus and, this year, this has been predominantly through the eyes of Luke. And one of the things that he reveals is that Jesus is an *unlikely* King.

His birth is unlikely in that who would have thought that the King of All Creation would be born in a humble stable just outside of Bethlehem?¹ This echoes the unassuming origins of King David as a shepherd boy looking after the family’s flocks, the youngest son of a man of modest means from the smallest tribe of Israel.² In the same way, Mary and Joseph were unlikely parents to raise the Christ-child, for they had no political connections to the Royal Palace in Jerusalem. And this should give us a hint as to the *kind* of King Jesus was to become. He is not a territorial King, but rather the *King of hearts* to all who will let him in.³

Another reason that Jesus is an unlikely King is that he did not try to raise an army to liberate Israel from the Roman Empire. In fact, on Palm Sunday he rode into Jerusalem in peace and on a donkey, *not* on a war horse. This was *not* the kind of Messiah the Jews anticipated and so when Jesus didn’t fulfil their expectations, many rejected him and his message.⁴ Without doubt there was wide-spread fascination with Jesus. It was not just the contents of his teaching that was refreshingly different, but his apparent authority in delivering his message, as demonstrated by him successfully challenging the religious leaders of the day. The miracles he performed, along with his association with society’s outcasts, brought popularity or notoriety – depending on your point of view. And as we all know, in the end he was betrayed by one friend and disowned by another, and he was arrested and tried for inciting treason. At the trial, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the *King* of the Jews?”⁵ Jesus replied enigmatically, “You say so!”⁶ Even so, Pilate himself realised that Jesus was no political threat and wanted to release him.⁷ Jesus is *not* that kind of King – one that wants to exert power or coerce others. Nevertheless, the outcome was that Jesus was sentenced to death in order to keep the peace.

Jesus is an unlikely King in the way that he died - through the agony and shame of crucifixion. This was the kind of death that was appropriate for criminals and slaves, people with no rights. Moreover, given the Jewish expectation that the Messiah would liberate Israel, it was unthinkable that this man on the cross could be God’s Chosen One. And as Paul later writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, death *by*

¹ See Luke 2:1-21. Surrounded by, of all people, *shepherds* – who were a lowly social class, even outcasts, in the 1st century.

² See 1 Sam 16:1-13.

³ As God said to Samuel at the time when he was anointing David, “You look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7b). One of Luke’s themes throughout his gospel is that *Jesus* knows the heart/thoughts of others.

⁴ See John 1:11. This issue becomes clearer in Luke’s book of Acts.

⁵ Luke 23:3.

⁶ Luke 23:3b.

⁷ Luke 23:4, 14b-15, 22. Significantly, Luke repeats this three times; Jesus is innocent of the charges.

crucifixion also created a stumbling block for law-abiding non-Jews to take Jesus seriously.⁸ Moreover, all the gospel writers tell us that there was a sign above his cross announcing, “This is the King of the Jews.”⁹ The Roman soldiers mocked him, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”¹⁰ Others people who stood and watched, including Jewish religious leaders, sneered at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself *if* he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”¹¹ Yet Jesus’ response only serves to underline what an unlikely king he is. Luke tells us Jesus did *not* curse his tormentors or pronounce God’s judgement on his killers, as was typical in noble, Jewish, martyr-stories.¹² Instead he said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.”¹³ This is no ordinary execution of a criminal; even the Roman centurion recognised this at the moment Jesus died, saying, “Surely this was a righteous man!”¹⁴

Yet within 30 to 40 years after the death of Jesus, the writer of Colossians portrays him in a very different light.¹⁵ Through the eloquent words of a poem or hymn,¹⁶ the author gives a vivid, potent picture of the supremacy of Jesus – a very different kind of king. The words point to Jesus Christ and what God has done *in* and *through* him. It also makes the case that by looking at Jesus we discover who God is, for “he is the very image of the invisible God.”¹⁷ The poem expands on that theme: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”¹⁸ In these words, then, we read that Jesus is no less than the co-creator of the entire cosmos, a description we also find in John’s gospel and the book of Hebrews.¹⁹ Such rhetoric speaks of the divinity of Jesus Christ. And he rules supreme over all other powers and authorities. Even so, the more we look at life and death of Jesus, the more we realise that the God he mirrors is a God of utter self-giving love. This is exemplified in those earlier words of Jesus on the cross, as well as in the words of acceptance and forgiveness he said to the criminal who died alongside him.²⁰

⁸ 1 Cor 1:18-31; (i.e., Jesus was, by definition, a serious criminal under Roman law. Jesus and his message were therefore suspect).

⁹ Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19

¹⁰ Luke 23:36.

¹¹ Luke 23:35. Notice how Luke points to the *identity* of Jesus in all these titles he places on the lips of those who insult him.

¹² See 2 Macc 7.

¹³ See how this attitude is mirrored in the stoning of Stephen; Acts 7:54-60. (Even if v34 is contested, the general point is valid. There is no crying out with a sense of abandonment by God in Luke’s account – cf. Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46.)

¹⁴ (or innocent) Luke 23:47; see also Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39 where the centurion refers to Jesus as the “Son of God.”

¹⁵ The date of Colossians depends to some extent on the authorship. If Paul was alive and was the author, then the earliest date is likely in the mid-50s A.D. The city itself was destroyed by an earthquake in around 63 A.D., with the earlier neighbouring city of Laodicea being destroyed in 61 A.D., and these sites remained uninhabited for quite a while thereafter. The vocabulary and style are different from the uncontested letters of Paul. Nevertheless, its theology is not that dissimilar, even if the social practices concerning women is more conservative. A date between 55-65 A.D. is reasonable and this is *prior* to Luke writing his gospel: 85 CE (± 5-10 years).

¹⁶ It is unclear as to whether the author wrote the (creedal) poem or is simply citing it.

¹⁷ Col 1:15, “*ikon*” is the Greek for “image.” This word implies an exact “representation” or “manifestation” – see Heb 1:3.

¹⁸ Col 1:16-17. See also 1 Cor 8:6

¹⁹ See also John 1:3 and Heb 1:2.

²⁰ See Luke 23:34, 43.

The poem continues by stating that this mirror-image of God, the one *through* whom and *for* whom the whole creation was made in the first place, *this* Jesus is also the head of the Church.²¹ And in a literary flourish, Jesus is not only described as the “first-born” of all creation but also as the first-born of the dead.²² In other words, as the head of the Church, Jesus was the *first* to arise from the dead in the resurrection. Consequently, not only was the world made *through* Jesus, but the world’s redemption or rescue was *also* through Jesus. And then we read one of many different statements in the New Testament as to the meaning or significance of Christ’s death. We are told that through this human tragedy, God was somehow reconciling *to* himself not just human beings but the *whole* cosmos by making peace through the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.²³ Given the lack of ritual sacrifice in our worship today, we sometimes struggle to understand this deeply-Jewish image. The early church came to understand Christ’s death to be the *last* sacrifice, the one to end all sacrifices.²⁴ Just a few verses earlier, the writer puts his explanation of the cross in a slightly different way, “[The Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”²⁵ However, we try to describe the pivotal significance of the cross, it is in *Jesus*, that this world and the world to come all hold together.²⁶

In our readings we have two seemingly paradoxical descriptions of kingship. One has Jesus, the so-called “King of the Jews,” executed by a shameful crucifixion. And the other has this elevated portrayal of glorified king over all time and space, the source and goal of history. What connects the two? The answer is simply the resurrection of Jesus, which Luke relates in the last chapter of his gospel and which is one of the two foundational events underpinning his book of Acts; the other one being the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.²⁷ *The resurrection changes everything* and that is why we can celebrate the cosmic Christ on this “Christ the King Sunday.” If Jesus had simply died and remained dead, we would likely have never heard of him. He would have been a failed wannabe Messiah in the company of many others. There would be *no reason* for Jews to remember such an embarrassing failure, despite his engaging parables. And recall that his parables are often about the nature of the Kingdom of God; but if Jesus remained dead, then so was the kingdom he announced.

In summary, Jesus is an unlikely king because of his birth and parents, because he failed to live up to the Jewish expectations of Messiahship, and because he died a criminal’s death. Jesus is also an unlikely king because the resurrection is an unlikely event! Nevertheless, Luke and the writer of Colossians - which may have been Paul himself - and many others were convinced of the reality of the resurrection. Indeed, it is only *because* the resurrection occurred that Christ’s followers – both then and now –

²¹ See Col 1:18.

²² Col 1:13b, 18. Being “the firstborn of all creation” created the well-known Arian controversy (3rd-4th century), but Athanasius was quick to point out that the next line (Col 1:16) states that “all things were created in and through Christ” and therefore contradicts such a *literal* interpretation of “first-born” (i.e., that Jesus is not co-eternal with God the Father).

²³ Col 1:19-20. There are various metaphors in describing the impact/significance of the cross in the New Testament. We would do well to consider them all! (In this Jewish image, forgiveness and reconciliation are linked to sacrifice.)

²⁴ The destruction of the Temple (70AD), the only place sacrifices were offered, underscores that fact.

²⁵ Col 1:13-14. (In v12, the writer also mentions a “kingdom of light” thus contrasting it to “dominion of darkness” (v13).

²⁶ Col 1:17b. One could also describe this in temporal terms: Jesus holds together this age and the age to come.

²⁷ See Acts 2. Of course, the coming of the Holy Spirit only makes sense in the light of the resurrection.

continue to reflect on the added, deeper significance of his death. Within a few decades, the Christian message had spread and taken root throughout the Roman Empire, and the world-wide Church, whose head is Christ,²⁸ still lives on 2000 years later. For this, and for other reasons, I am convinced the bodily resurrection of Jesus actually happened. And I therefore proclaim him as King of All Creation! History is *going* somewhere; God is *still* reconciling the world through Christ and one day it *will* be completed. Yet I admit that on the face of it, Jesus is an unlikely king in human or secular terms. He is not what the world expects, but he is the kind of king the world needs.

The world is tired of kings who rule by force and oppression. We are weary of self-serving political power games, and of people getting to the top by stepping on those below them. In this sense, our world today parallels that of the Roman Empire. We desperately need a different way forward. Are we prepared to follow a very different kind of king? A king of hearts? In world obsessed by power, whether political, economic, military, or simply social dynamics, the alternative Jesus modeled seems foolish. After all, he was *killed* for it! But, as I have been saying over the last few weeks, the resurrection demonstrates that death itself is not the end and, therefore, this liberates us to live life *purposefully* and *without fear*.²⁹ In light of all this, Paul describes the paradoxical message of the cross in this way: "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."³⁰ And this is consistent with the surprising upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God we have been learning about from Luke.³¹ Jesus, the unlikely king, still seeks followers who will walk in his footsteps, aided by his Spirit. Will we all be those people? God being our helper, we will! Amen. Let us pray.

²⁸ Col 1:18.

²⁹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Stand-Firm.pdf> and <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Marriage-and-the-General-Resurrection.pdf>.

³⁰ I Cor 1:25.

³¹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>