
Good Shepherd, Crucified King

Well, that was a lot of reading for today. All four Scriptures set out for the Reign of Christ Sunday. We don't usually do this: we usually limit it to one or two readings. Today, you know what it feels like to be an Anglican, being served up the full feast of Scripture selections! That's not why I chose to do this—to make you feel like Anglicans for the day. It's just that this Reign of Christ Sunday is something that many of us—myself included—are a bit fuzzy on. The four readings for today are assembled as a set; together they tell a story, and only reading some of them leaves out important chunks of the story.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, Reign of Christ, or Christ the King, Sunday was added to the liturgical calendar by the Pope in the 1920s. The original purpose of this special day was to draw Christians' attention back to our own story, and away from some of the competing narratives of that time.

This was a time when Communism, Fascism, and Naziism were being touted as comprehensive social systems, scientifically designed to best meet human needs. The Church

naturally saw these competing narratives as a challenge or a threat.

If you are of a somewhat cynical orientation, you might see this as a case of the Church fighting to maintain control, to maintain a hold over the hearts and minds of its members. As though it were simply a case of an institution trying to maintain its power in a time of great change.

And perhaps there is some truth to that. Human nature being what it is, and the Church being a place where the call of God intersects with our very human desires, it's always possible for the Church to act out of less than holy motivations. So, it's possible that the Church saw Naziism, and Fascism, and Communism, and secularization generally, as threats to its power. That's looking through a somewhat cynical lens. But if we take off our cynic glasses, and look instead with the eyes of faith, I think we see something different.

With the eyes of faith, we see that the Church saw these movements not so much as threats to its power, but as threats to its understanding of what human beings are; and what life in the

world is supposed to be; and the whole question of how God relates to humanity.

The Church saw these new ideologies as having an impoverished view of human nature. Human beings were reduced to being cogs in a machine, or anonymous pawns in a faceless system, in the mass movements of that era. Modern science seemed to push God further and further to the margins, and in the Communist system, God was removed altogether. Naziism and Fascism celebrated human achievement and technological advancement, the emergence of God-like powers and capabilities, as though we were outgrowing our dependence upon God.

In the face of all this, the Church asserted the inherent worth of every human being, and of each creature. Humans of all kinds were made in God's image; all creatures have a face, and a name, and are beloved of God.

This is the story that these four readings for today want to assert, so let's move through them one by one. The first reading that Sharon read, from Jeremiah, offers a warning and a promise: a warning to would-be leaders and rulers, and a promise to those being ruled over.

Using a common biblical image of the shepherd as a model leader, those in authority are warned about behaviours that are predatory and destructive of the flock. If they take advantage of the sheep, if they fail to attend to their needs, God will take

notice. Authority is not about amassing special privileges for oneself, and enriching oneself or one's businesses. Authority is stewardship, the willingness to lay down one's life for those in one's charge. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

The reading from Jeremiah also contains the promise of a Good Shepherd, a promise that Christians understand to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the righteous branch of David. As we turn to the season of Advent next week, we will dive in to the connections between Old Testament promises and the ways that the early Church saw those fulfilled in Jesus.

For today, we have as our second reading the Song of Zechariah; Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah is singing his joyful praise on the miraculous birth of his son, miraculous because he and his wife Elizabeth were well-beyond the usual parenting years, and had been childless despite long years of marriage.

Of course, miraculous conceptions and births—often involving older childless couples, or as we'll recall in a few weeks, unmarried virgins—this is one of the ways the Bible says that what is impossible for humans is possible for God. God is able to draw life out of a place of no-life; light from darkness; new beginnings out of apparent endings.

It's not all up to us, thanks be to God; there is more than we can understand or know. The Song of

Zechariah affirms again that God is a promise-keeping God—a saviour—who never forgets his people. God is a rescuer of the oppressed. God longs to be reconciled to us, and for us to draw close to him. God is merciful, bringing light to those who languish in darkness, and guiding us in the ways of peace.

We are not alone; we are not on our own. We live in God's world, thanks be to God.

Our third reading takes a darker turn, leading us to the place of suffering and death, the place that is called The Skull. But here again, we have an image of kingship seen through God's eyes. Jesus is mockingly named the King of the Jews by those who think they have power over him, those who think he is of no account, and can be erased—rubbed out—from history like so many nameless, poor, brutalized people.

But of course the joke is on them because Jesus really is the King, the Promised One, God's Anointed; the Good Shepherd prophesied by Jeremiah, the Saviour sung about by Zechariah. They don't see it: nobody there—well, almost nobody—sees who Jesus really is because they were expecting the Messiah to come in glory, and with awesome power.

Instead, he comes humbly, his throne a cross. That he is God's true King is shown by what he does: the good shepherd does as good shepherds do; he lays down his life for the sheep.

Notice the company he keeps; he doesn't just lay down his life for his

friends, his chums, those who are like him, those who share his skin colour, or place of origin; he lays down his life for the least of these, and even for the worst of these. His companions are death row inmates.

It is one of these condemned men who is the only person there that day who sees who Jesus really is. In the agony of the cross, at the point of death, he knows who is there, hanging, suffering, beside him; and he prays, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He knows it's not a joke, thanks be to God—that God is with him, that even the place of The Skull is not a God-forsaken place.

The ideologies of the mid-twentieth century tended to have an optimistic view of history: things were always moving onward and upward, at least if you were the right kind of people, the ones favoured by the particular regime. At the same time, those ideologies caused suffering previously unknown throughout all of human history.

The cross affirms that as regimes and ideologies march boldly onward through history, God is with those trampled underfoot. God keeps showing up on death row, and in refugee camps, in places where addictions and poverty and violence seem to have the last word. God keeps showing amongst those whom we would cast off, toss aside, erase from history, and from the story of who we are as a people and as a country.

Our final image today comes from the letter to the Colossians. It gives us an idea of what the early Church made of all this, of all that had come before. It's their summation of who Jesus was: Good Shepherd, Promised Saviour, Crucified King, and ultimately, Cosmic Christ. In this passage, Jesus is fully God, part of what will come to be expressed later as the Trinity. Jesus is also identified here with Wisdom, with God from the beginning, sharing in the whole process of creation.

Jesus is the image and the embodiment—the incarnation—of God, and Jesus is connected to all of creation and to the Church. It's in Jesus that all things are reconciled to God, through the mystery of the cross.

All of these images together are meant to provide an alternative story to the stories the world tells. The stories the world tells about power, and how it is to be exercised. The stories the world tells about the purpose of our lives, and the sources of meaning we seek. Why are we here? What does a good life look like? What goals should we chase after?

Reign of Christ Sunday continues to offer a challenge to the ways of the world. To those who think power is about amassing money and privilege so that you can lord it over others, Reign of Christ Sunday says that the true goal of power is service, a willingness to use one's resources to protect and provide for those who are vulnerable.

To those who believe that God is not there, or that God is not able or willing to be of any help to us; that we are, for all intents and purposes, on our own: Reign of Christ Sunday says that God is a promise-keeper who loves us, and will not leave us to our own devices. That despite our destructive tendencies expressed in our ideologies and our technologies, God continues to draw life out of no-life, and light out of darkness.

To those who would write off the lowly, or the disreputable, those we think of as 'less than': the addicted and the criminal; the disabled and challenged; those of different races and faiths; anyone who doesn't fit the current fashion of what makes for the ideal image of the human person—which, let's be honest, is often White, male, heterosexual, and well-off—to those who would write off all those who 'fall short' of this ideal, Reign of Christ Sunday reminds of the company God in Jesus keeps.

The stories we tell this Sunday, in particular the story of the Cross that is at the very heart of our Christian story, is also a not-so-subtle reminder of the company that we *ought* to keep. We ought to be where Jesus was.

Finally, to those who would suggest that the Church is a spent force, something soon to be swept aside in the march of history, Reign of Christ Sunday makes the improbable argument that the Church is at the very heart of God's ongoing work of reconciling the world to himself. That the Jesus we try to follow as disciples is

with God, and is God; has been from the very beginning, and will be till the end of time.

The message of Reign of Christ Sunday is needed as much today as it was a hundred years ago. Many of the challenges we face seem different; many seem eerily familiar to those that faced the world then. Faithfulness to the Gospel, and resistance to the powerfully persuasive ideologies of that era, did not ensure that everything turned out all right. The mid-twentieth century was a time of great darkness and suffering for many.

But those who were faithful, those who resisted, provided light in that darkness, and hope when things seemed hopeless. They kept alive this story of a God of compassion and mercy; a God who keeps promises; a God who keeps company with the lonely, the forgotten, and the miserable; a God who has created and keeps creating; a God who is not done with us yet, and will never, ever, let us go.

A hundred years ago people needed to hear those stories. I suspect that there are many, many who need to hear these stories today. Who will tell these stories? Who will give witness? Will you? Amen.

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