

Welcome to Paradise

Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Luke 23:33-43

Reign of Christ Sunday/25th November 2007

Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday is always an odd Sunday in the liturgical calendar. This last Sunday of the year is almost a non-event. The church I grew up in really didn't follow the liturgical calendar (except for Advent and Holy Week). I only discovered the Reign of Christ Sunday when I got to seminary and since then it's been a process of coming to terms with it, with growing appreciation.

There are at least three reasons, I think, for its "oddness," sort of three strikes against it. First, has to do with timing. In years when Advent begins the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the Reign of Christ is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Most churches prefer to sing "Come, Ye Thankful People Come," instead of "Crown Him with Many Crowns." So it quickly gets overlooked. On those wonderful years when Advent begins in December, leaving a whole week between Thanksgiving and the start of Advent, like this year – thanks be to Yahweh! – the day still gets lost because this Sunday is usually a low-energy one as people recover from travel and eating too much and may be already overwhelmed by the pace of the holiday season.

Second, there's the whole problem with using the language of monarchy in a democracy – which don't go well together, except in Britain perhaps. I have a good friend in Scotland who teaches at St. Andrews, Ian Bradley, who wrote a book with the title *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy*, in which he calls for a re-sacralization of the monarchy as denoting a spiritual dimension to national and public life in Britain.¹ That wouldn't fly here. Yet, we Americans still call Christ our King and use all the royal metaphors in hymns and prayers. It doesn't make much sense. But we really can't do much without it, because these metaphors run through scripture, from King David to King Jesus.

The third strike is perhaps the texts for these Sundays. The Jeremiah text, sure we can relate to that one, of a true shepherd, a Shepherd King who will lead the flock toward justice. These images are developed in John's gospel. But Luke's text with Jesus conversation on the cross – why this text? Why do we have to turn to that image as we enter the holiday season? What does this text have to offer us one week before Advent?

¹ Published in London by Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003.

A word about the liturgical calendar might be helpful here. The liturgical calendar orders time according to the story of God's salvation. It begins with Advent – the promised coming of a Savior who will rescue us from every power that seeks to destroy us – which leads to Christmas, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, and so forth. The Christian year is a template of Jesus' life – pre-birth, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and the future he brings – placed upon the lunar calendar. It's this rhythm of seasons that moves the Christian through life and serves as a constant reminder that time itself has been redeemed, that from the beginning of time to its fulfillment we belong to God. All of time belongs to God and God will achieve God's purposes *in* time, *through* time. Humanity and the universe with it will be fully redeemed, and as Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) said long ago, "All shall be well, and all shall be well." But, we ask, when? When? Where?

On the Reign of Christ Sunday we acknowledge the consummation of Jesus' life and his celestial enthronement at the right hand of God. Christ reigns and from his throne oversees the movement of history directing us toward justice and peace. The great hymn in Colossians, also one of the lections for the day, could easily give us an image of that heavenly scene: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his *cross* (Colossians 1: 15-29, emphasis added)." But when, when? Where?

We need to go back to the cross. According to Luke, atop the cross Jesus has a conversation with the "good" criminal who was also crucified that day. This criminal, acknowledging his own guilt and confessing Jesus' innocence, offers this well-known, really remarkable petition, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." Let's unpack this. If you assume that the location of Jesus' kingdom, which is the Kingdom of God, is in the life to come after death, maybe his petition is really not all that remarkable, although it has a pious ring to it. But if Jesus' kingdom is here, in this world, as Jesus told us it was over and over again, which in Luke's gospel was stressed repeatedly, and if the kingdom refers to a realm of influence in this world where Jesus presumably is king, this means that Herod can't be king and Caesar can't be king. Here we see the courageous faith of that criminal, because he knows who is in control (not Rome), even though apparently weak on the cross, Jesus is the one with true power, power that redeems and saves and changes lives and the world. But when? When will this be? Where?

Jesus' response is significant, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." This is the only time we ever hear Jesus use the word "paradise." Why is this? Some think Christianity is a religion that gets you safely from this life to heaven, to paradise, where the focus of the faith is on the world to come – will we go up to heaven or down to Sheol or some other place? I had a professor at seminary who said Christianity is more than a geography lesson, figuring out who goes up and who goes down. It's more than this. If the focus of Jesus' ministry was only to get people to heaven, you would have thought he'd taken the time to bring it up earlier instead of moments before his death! The last interaction Jesus has is with a *guilty* criminal about the promise of paradise. Odd, isn't it? Not for Luke, as we'll see in a minute. Add to this the problem that Jesus never defines what he means by paradise. In Judaism at the time, there were different ways of understanding this word, depending upon whether or not you believed in the resurrection of the dead, and some Jews, like the Sadducees, didn't.²

What did Jesus mean? I'm going to give you a scientific, theological answer: we honestly don't know. But whatever paradise is, this much we do know: *it's with him*. Jesus says paradise is "with me." Whatever it is, it is with Christ, and maybe that's enough, maybe that's all we need to know. Who will be there? To the criminal, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me." Luke, more than any other gospel-writer, drives this point home, the beloved subjects in the Kingdom of God are the guilty and the disposed, the lost and the least, the downtrodden, the broken, the powerless, and the poor, the marginalized and the forgotten – people like you and me. These are the people in God's Kingdom. But when? When? "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Today. Not in some distant future, but now. *Today* is the day of salvation. Not in some pie-in-the-sky place, by-in-by, but here. If we go back to the great hymn from Colossians and pay close attention to the tense of the hymn, the reconciliation that Christ achieved on that cross is not planned for some time to come, but is now. Christ reigns, *now*. Christ has already broken the power of sin and death in us. All rulers, principalities, powers, dominions, everyone who claims to have so much power in this world are really powerless before the redemptive power of Christ's love. A new age has already dawned in him. Christ even now holds all things together. Our world, our lives, our time are hidden in his time.

² Exegetical notes for this lectionary found at the Center for Excellence in Preaching: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>

This might seem like a puzzling conclusion to make in our age. Read the newspaper and we can easily draw contrary conclusions about who is really in charge or in control. However, every New Testament witness makes it exceedingly clear that the new life Jesus offers, this life in the kingdom of God, the new day of paradise of life with him, has already dawned in and we are already living in it. We have glimpses of it now – like when one is baptized. At the font we claim a future hope that past and present cannot reveal. Because God’s promises are secure about what the future will be our lives in the meantime, in the in-between-time, are different and imbued with grace and hope. The new life of Christ is now-but-not-yet; here, but not here yet; we live in the “everlasting instant.” You see, the Christian life is always a call to a deeper embrace of paradox. It’s already arrived, yet on the way, it’s coming – like Advent – and we live in the present from that promise.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) said, “All the way to heaven is heaven, because He said, ‘I am the way.’” We could say all the way to paradise is paradise, because, He said, “I am the way,” and to be in paradise is to be with him, making even baptism, therefore, a kind of “welcome to paradise” proclamation.

This is a fitting place to bring this liturgical year to a close on the eve of a new one that is beginning. Paradise, Jesus said is to be “with me.” Next week, Advent waiting sends us on another journey as we welcome the birth of Immanuel, “God with us.” “With me.” “God with us.” From the beginning of time to its end, the grand redemptive theme of the universe resounds through time and space: *welcome to paradise!* Alleluia! Alleluia! Thanks be to God!

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