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Trinity Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6  
Colossians 1: 11 - 20

Psalms 46  
Luke 23: 33 – 43

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King of Glory, King of Peace, I will love thee:  
And that love may never cease, I will move thee.  
Thou hast granted my request, thou hast heard me:  
Thou didst note my working breast, thou hast spared me.

Hymn #382 is one of my favorite hymns. I had it sung at both of my ordinations. And when I was reading through this week's Gospel, I couldn't help thinking about it and singing it to myself. This is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, and the gateway into Advent, the time of preparing for Jesus, as Christ the King, to come once again – into our hearts and into our world.

While some of our neighbors – and maybe some of us – already have Christmas decorations out, we hear in today's reading from Luke the seemingly odd juxtaposition of the crucifixion. The crucifixion, where Pilate has a sign placed over Jesus on the cross which reads "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (in art, it's usually abbreviated from the Greek as simply INRI). The crucifixion, where only in Luke's Gospel, do we get to listen in on the conversation between the criminals hanging on either side of Jesus: one mocking Jesus and the other both affirming Jesus and pleading with him.

For the first time, I thought about the words of this hymn perhaps being the song of the penitent man, the one who has asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into his Kingdom ('remember' in Scripture – to have special regard for). How does this condemned man know about Jesus and who he truly is? Or has he simply had a chance to read the sign being placed above Jesus? But if that's the case, then why does he put so much faith and trust in Jesus? How can he be so sincere in his acclamation and request when he knows that Jesus is dying too?

The great 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet, George Herbert penned the lines from which this hymn comes. Listen to these words again:

*"Thou hast granted my request, thou hast heard me:  
Thou didst note my working breast, thou hast spared me."*

Doesn't that sound as if it could be the thoughts of a man, whose body is straining to breathe as he slowly suffocates? Doesn't it sound like the peace that passes all understanding that comes over him after Jesus promises that "Today, you will be with me in paradise?"

Listen to a little more, including part of a verse that isn't in our hymnal:

*"Though my sins against me cried, thou didst clear me;  
And alone, when they replied, thou didst hear me."  
Thou grew soft and moist with tears, thou relented:  
And when Justice called for fears, thou dissented.*

It seems that there on the cross, the penitent criminal (who's often referred to as the 'penitent thief' though we don't really have any idea what his crime was) is given a little glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Enough to be able to trust in the promises of Jesus with his very life. And

the really wonderful thing about the story is that it could be about any one of us in our darkest moments and places.

But what an odd place for a king to be, hung on a cross. And what an odd time to talk about a kingdom when there is nothing but death ahead, or so it seems. We often talk about how Jesus turns the values of this world upside down when he speaks about the Kingdom of God. So what more dramatic inversion could we imagine than to see the exact opposite of a worldly king, one who would be robed in splendor, guarded by troops, wielding power, flaunting riches, ruling subjects and servants, and spilling blood in battles! Christ the King is naked, vulnerable, powerless, penniless, servant of all and allowing his own blood to be shed. With this reality hanging right beside him, what kind of future Kingdom could the penitent criminal possibly be imagining? What is it that enables this broken man to see the truth in the one on hangs just a few feet away from him? What is it about Christ's Kingship that emanates from him, even on the cross? Or perhaps especially from the cross, for Christ is King even there.

As Rosalind Brown has written in *Christian Century* magazine (11/11/98), "kingship, when God is involved, does not ask people to ignore the failures but embraces those experiences and redeems them." Who could possibly desire that embrace and redemption more than this criminal on the cross?

Centuries before, when Israel demanded a king from God, God promised the people of God a king who would be righteous (i.e. in a right relationship with God), and who would deal fairly and wisely, execute justice in the land, and enable the people to live securely. After centuries of all-too-human kings who failed to live up to that, God fulfills that promise in Jesus. Jesus' kingship models a new way of being king. A way in which God can share in the seeming hopelessness of our human condition. A way in which hope and life and light enter into our darkness.

It is Pilate's custom to place the crimes for which people have been tried on a sign above them on the cross as a means of deterrence. But instead of simply saying "treason" or "insurrection," Pilate takes one last dig at the Jewish leadership which has caused him all this trouble. He has "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" written on the sign. Pilate has absolutely no clue how right he is. But it doesn't take the early church long to begin worshiping Jesus the Christ as even more: King of Kings, King of the Ages, King of Peace, Ruler of the kings on earth. Even all those attributions don't begin to plumb the depths of Jesus' reign.

Paul begins to get at those depths in his letter to the Colossians. Apparently, the church in Colossae has become a mash up of various religious beliefs, not just those which Paul had handed on to them. In the whole of the letter, Paul refers to many syncretistic practices going on, as well as incomplete or inaccurate understandings of Jesus. Influenced by the Platonic thinking of the Greeks, Paul refers to the practices of the Colossians as "mere shadows of the reality that has been experienced in Jesus." (D. Clendinen, *Journey with Jesus*, 2013) Paul argues throughout the letter that Jesus was not just some carpenter's son, or an itinerant rabbi or even some rogue king out to usurp Rome's power. Jesus is not even just the head of the church, Paul writes. Jesus is not merely any or even all of those things; he is so very much more. And in the lovely hymn, or Christological confession, we hear in the reading today, Paul makes any earthly comparison to Jesus' Kingship look like so much mist or smoke and mirrors.

For Paul, Jesus the Christ is King of the Cosmos and all that is in it. Jesus, the perfect image of God, is the means of creation for all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible,

whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, and is that which holds all of creation together. In the person and work of Jesus, Paul says, God is in the process of reconciling all things to God's self. Peace and reconciliation, brought about by the willingness to be crucified, are the hallmarks of Jesus' kingship, not domination and exploitation that are the properties of earthly kings.

It is the Feast of Christ the King. And one of the purposes of this day is to remind ourselves that we are not the center of the universe: Jesus the Christ is. When we are tempted to want to put limits on the work of Christ, today's lessons force us to stretch our imaginations and broaden our horizons and our understanding of Jesus' Kingship. Today's lessons take us from creation to the new creation, from the alpha to the omega, from before time was until after time shall cease to exist, from the scandal of the particularity of Jesus' life and death in time and place to the limitlessness of the cosmos, from alienation and brokenness to relationship and healing, and in all that, we find the image of the invisible God.

In the words of Paul, "may [we] be made strong with all the strength that comes from [Jesus'] glorious power, and may [we] be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], who has enabled [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

King of glory, King of peace, may yours be the power and the dominion for ever and ever!  
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