
Jer 23.1-6; C.19 (Lk 1.68-79); Col 1.11-20;
Lk 23.33-43

*May my words and our thoughts
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,
our strength and our redeemer.*

Occasionally, on first looking
at the readings for a Sunday
on which I'm to preach,
nothing palatable seems
to present itself.

How different is it today.

A veritable smorgasbord!

'Oh, oh' –
I hear you thinking –
'I should have stayed home'.

Indeed.

How can I limit my sermon
to less than 3 hours?

Fear not!

By dint of ruthless editing,
I've whittled things down
to manageable proportions!

Today, in the Church Calendar,
could be called our
New Year's Eve –
the last Sunday of the Church-year
that began last December,
on the 1st Sunday of Advent.

On this day,
the Church – fittingly –
invites us to celebrate
the Reign of Christ –
*...he who is, to quote St Paul,
the blessed and only Sovereign,
the King of kings and Lord of lords.*
(1 Tm 6.15)

Alleluia!

God save the King!

*

But hold on a minute.

Our besetting temptation
is to apply to all of this
our own preconceptions
and prejudices.

We know,
or we think we know,
what it means to reign,
to be sovereign,
to be a king, a lord.

And of course...,
it must be –
that's what Jesus is.

We couldn't be more wrong.

Which is where this morning's
smorgasbord of readings
are a necessary antidote
to the poisons we prefer!

Jeremiah first.

*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 this is the name
by which he will be called:
"The Lord – our righteousness."
(Jer 23.5f.)*

Jeremiah has been called
the prophet of tears.

No prophet
exercised his ministry
in darker times than he.

It was his lot
to set his own people's
archetypal holocaust –
their slaughter, captivity,

and exile
at the hands of the
Babylonians –
within, and not outside,
the sovereign purpose
of their God.

So terrible was his
God-given ministry
that it drew from him
bitter and desperate cries:
*O Lord, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
...everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
...“Violence and destruction!”
...the word of the Lord
has become for me
a reproach and derision
all day long.*

....
*Cursed be the day
on which I was born!*

....
*Why did I come forth
from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?*
(Jer 20.7f., 14ff.)

Grim stuff.

Which makes
this morning’s announcement
all the more remarkable.

It’s one of very few –
but so precious –
beams of brilliant light
that pierce the otherwise
impenetrable darkness.

The darkness
of God’s refusal
to turn a blind eye
to his people’s
persistent rebellion
and disobedience.

But, judgment is never
God’s last word.

So it is –
Jeremiah is given
to speak words

of reassurance
to his people.

Their God will raise up for them
a wise and just ruler
whose tantalizingly
mysterious title will be:
...the Lord – our righteousness.

At the proper time,
his people's un-righteousness
will be a thing of the past –
but not by their own
achievement.

Rather, as gift and endowment –
at the hand of –
...the Lord – our righteousness.

'Tantalizingly mysterious' I've called it.

If we would enter
a bit further
into that mystery
we best turn to our other readings.

Our second lesson,
is among the most
extravagantly rich celebrations
of the reign of Christ
in all of Scripture.

I restrict myself
to three brief comments.

First..., St Paul tells us,
Jesus' reign extends
over all creation.

...all things [in heaven and earth],
he writes,
have been created
through him and for him.
(Col 1.16)

...through him....

The creative word of God
on each of the six days
of creation in Genesis 1
was none other than
the very *Word*
which *became flesh*
in the person of Jesus.

*

But not only ...*through him*.

Also ...*for him*.

All creation
is nothing less than
the Father's gift
to his beloved Son.

*

As if that were not enough –
St Paul assures us,
...*in [Christ] all things hold together*.
(Col 1.17)

Creation – being *in Christ* –
is possessed of order and purpose –
rhythm and melody –
that compares – albeit
with surpassing glory –
to the very greatest
of musical compositions.

Next, St Paul
turns his attention
to the reign of Christ
in his Church.

[Jesus] is, he writes,
the head of the body, the church....
(Col 1.18)

No, neither the Pope,
nor the Patriarch of Constantinople
or Moscow,
let alone the British monarch,
the Archbishop of Canterbury,
or the Primate of Canada
is the head
of the church.

In so far as these
or any other church leaders
forget or ignore
St Paul's assertion –
the church will blunder.

*

Nor is Christ's headship
in the church
merely nominal, honorary!

No!

Rather is it
living and active.

As the Church takes that to heart –
ordering every aspect of its life
with deliberate reference to its Lord –
it will surely serve
its God-given purpose.

*

What is that purpose?

St Paul tells us plainly.

The Church, as Christ's body,
is the means, the instrument,
whereby Jesus –
*...might come to have
first place in everything.*
(Col 1.18)

Not that he
isn't already
Lord of all.

But that the world
might no longer ignore or reject,
but gladly acknowledge
his preeminence.

Having celebrated
Christ's reign in creation
and in his church,
St Paul points us
to the heart of the matter –
Christ's relation
to God the Father
and the Spirit.

Nor must we omit
the rest of the sentence:
...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.
(Col 1.20)

God's reconciliation
of the world to himself
in the crucified Jesus
is the fulfilment
of what we heard earlier
from Jeremiah.

Remember?

...this is the name
by which he will be called:
"The Lord – our righteousness."

We are made righteous –
not by our own efforts –
but by the cross of
...the Lord – our righteousness.

With that,
and by way of conclusion,
we come to today's Gospel.

Early on, I warned you
of the besetting temptation
to hear all of this through the filter
of our own prejudices
and preconceptions.

Our Gospel
wonderfully undermines
that temptation.

Where do we go
if we would see
the reign of Christ
gloriously exemplified?

To the foot of the Cross.

To Jesus hanging and dying
between two *criminals*.

Could anything
more devastatingly explode
our notions of royalty,
sovereignty, and majesty?

The same notions that, no doubt,
informed the scoffing
and contempt
of those looking on:

*“He saved others;
let him save himself
if he is the Anointed of God,
his chosen one!”*
(Lk 23.35)

*“If you are
the King of the Jews,
save yourself!”*
(Lk 23.37)

For what’s really going on here
we must draw nearer –
spellbound –
listening in on
the intimate encounter
between the penitent thief
and our Lord.

It’s just here,
that Jeremiah’s prophetic title
and St Paul’s exuberant celebration
are brought into dramatic relief.

Rebuking his fellow criminal’s contempt,
and acknowledging
their just desserts,
the thief testifies of Jesus:
...but this man has done nothing wrong.”
(Lk 23.41)

Then..., turning to Jesus,
he utters his astonishing plea:
*Jesus, remember me
when you come
in your kingdom.*
(Lk 23.42)

I say ‘astonishing’.

Because he knows,
without a doubt –
that this dying man
is Lord and King.

A dying man
who will, moreover,
against all expectation,
victoriously inaugurate
his *kingdom*.

Jesus, remember me –
when [not 'if'] –
when you come
in your kingdom.

And Jesus' breathtaking reply?

Truly I tell you,
today you will be with me
in Paradise.
(Lk 23.43)

*

Here we are given to see
what it is for Jesus to be
...the Lord – our righteousness.

This criminal is –
self-confessedly –
un-righteous –
in his own words:
...we indeed have been
condemned justly,
for we are getting what we deserve
for our deeds....

Jesus' word of assurance, then,
is sheer, unmerited grace.

Dying here, upon the cross,
he is bearing in himself –
and, as such, bearing away –
this criminal's wickedness –
and yours, and mine!

Bearing it away
so unreservedly,
so completely,
that –

Truly, I tell you,
today you will be with me
in Paradise.

In celebration of the reign of Christ –
 ...*the Lord* – *our righteousness* –
 can we do better
 than to echo
 the song of the angels
 in St John's great vision?

Worthy is the Lamb
 that was slain
 to receive power and wealth
 and wisdom and might
 and honor and glory
 and blessing...
 forever and ever!

Amen.
(Rv 5.12, 13)