



Christ the King Sunday

Welcoming the King

[RCL]: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Downton Abbey, the much-beloved PBS television series, recently came out with a feature-length movie. The entire plot was based on the Abbey preparing for and having a 24-hour visit from the King and Queen of England. For those of you unfamiliar with the series, Downton Abbey is a large country manor that houses “upstairs” nobility, in the form of an earl and his wife whose resources are dwindling (though expectations about how to fulfill their station in life are not), and the “downstairs” servants, with various social rank from the butler down to the carriage footmen. The series focuses on two groups who are bound to each other through strict hierarchical social rules, the “upstairs” family and others of their aristocratic class and the “downstairs” servants.

For about two hours, viewers got to see all the drama and fuss the Abbey went through to put on airs, to be seen as “good enough” for the visit. From the earl down to a local shopkeeper, everyone believed that this visit from royalty signified great honor, no matter how brief. Everyone wanted to gaze at the royalty (just as we do today in our grocery checkout line) and impress them. We associate royalty with power, treat members of that class deferentially (at least on the surface), and fantasize about their privilege and glamor, gawking over the size of the princess’ ring or how the royals dress their infants.

There are a few Gospel passages that would pair better with our assumptions about royalty than what we read today – like Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with crowds shouting “Hosanna”, or the visit from three kings following his birth, or even one of the resurrection appearances in which Jesus does miraculous things like walking through locked doors.

But none of those is appointed. Today’s passage offends our sensibilities and hurts our hearts if we really let it in. Our natural human reaction is to flinch and turn away – just the opposite of what happens when we see Harry and Meghan in the checkout line magazine. A ridiculed, helpless man with a sign that was intended to be derogatory hanging over his head, having his last conversation on earth, gasping for breath, offering his perpetrators forgiveness, promising to remember a dying criminal, assuring him that they’ll be together in Paradise.

The other scriptures appointed for today offer us some helpful context for putting this offensive and painful image of King Jesus in the broader story of our faith. They help us make sense of this image, so that we might

be able to abide at the foot of the cross a little longer, not to gawk and gaze as at a royal parade, but to come to know ourselves as forgiven and, like the criminal, worthy of joining Christ the King in Paradise.

About 600 years before Christ became incarnate, before “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” among us, the people of Judah experienced one of the greatest losses imaginable: exile. They were invaded by the day’s superpower, Babylon. There were mass deportations and their holy place – the Temple – was destroyed. Jeremiah was one of a handful of prophets who saw this coming. He was compelled by God’s Spirit to warn folks of the coming doom, to plead with them to change their ways. As exile’s reality unfolded, the Lord spoke through Jeremiah to offer images of hope and promise so that the Jews could hold on to the stories they had, the culture they had, the faith they had – even in the harshest of circumstances.

Surprisingly, the central cause of Judah’s exile was *not* the aggressive, greedy, land-hungry Babylonians. Rather, it was Judah’s own corrupt leadership from the inside; the Shepherds of Judah – their kings (and let’s throw in the priests, too, because Judah was a theocracy) – were corrupt.

Instead of caring for the flock, they scattered them.

Instead of attending to the people, they were exploiting their labor.

Instead of integrating God’s laws into the fabric of how the power structure did business, they chose the oh-so-human law of “might makes right.”

By this point in the book of Jeremiah, the leadership of these corrupt shepherds has unavoidable consequences that will lead to suffering: exile is inevitable. So, Jeremiah pivots from proclaiming doom to offering hope in God’s promises. Look beyond the horizon and see the promise of a new Shepherd.

A Shepherd who gathers, not scatters.

A Shepherd who will bring them back, not drive them away, who will lead them beside still waters instead of making them work or be on-call or be ready to respond to anxiety-driven texts and emails at all hours.

A Shepherd whose grace enables them to realize the intention God had for humanity from the beginning: to be fruitful and multiply, to flourish.

Now as Christians, we look at this Old Testament text and can’t help but imagine Jesus and the Spirit at work. Surely the Gospel-writers did too, as they found ways to connect Jesus to the ancient testimony of Scripture.

Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the King gathers us – especially those most likely to be left behind.

Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the King is willing to speak truth to power.

Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the King bids us to lay our burdens down and come to him for rest.

This kind of shepherding, this kind of kingship is costly. The kings of the world resist it, despise it, want to stamp it out – and they try to do so. That’s what we see on Calvary. A battle between worldly kings and the Divine King. Corrupt shepherds and the Good Shepherd. Between the way of love – which happens through forgiveness, compassion, and peace, words Zechariah uses in today’s canticle – and the way of evil, greed, and fear.

Turning now to the second lesson, the writer of Colossians tries to help us understand the cross, to the extent that any of us can understand a mystery. The cross. The poetry of Colossians puts into big-picture perspective the particular and scandalous agony of Christ the King dying shamefully on a cross. You see, the cross is a turning point in a larger cosmic story that begins at Creation and won’t end until we experience the fullness of God’s promise: that all things are reconciled to God, whether on earth or in heaven – until the whole cosmos rests in God’s peace.

We get glimpses of that peace now and again when Jesus, the Prince of Peace, draws near us in acts of courage, kindness, and generosity. But we have to remember that the *Pax Christi*, the Peace of Christ, comes through the cross. It does not come through our efforts, but rather God’s graciousness. Whatever schemes we devise, whatever plans our presidential candidates offer, whatever justice is implemented in the land is provisional: it stands under the judgment and the promise of the cross.

Earthly kings at their best point us to our divine king and his life-giving law.

We are about to enter the season of Advent: four weeks of preparation to receive our king. What does it look like for us to prepare? It probably isn’t much like Downton Abbey’s preparation for a visitation from on high – it doesn’t involve polishing a lot of silver, or obsessing about how our house looks before we invite friends in, or worrying about finding the most unique, hand-crafted, artisan, ecologically-responsible, fair-traded, beautifully presented gift for our loved ones.

No, we are preparing for a visit from royalty who always greets us with forgiveness, acceptance, and love, a visit from a king who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross. A king who prefers the company of the lost, the lonely, least, and the last. A king who can hear the cry of the criminal and the cry of desperate: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” A king who promises from the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer serves as the Rector of Grace Church in the Mountains, in Waynesville, NC. She has degrees from Davidson College, University of Edinburgh and Episcopal Divinity School. In this phase of life, most of her discretionary time is lovingly devoured by small children. Her two primary spiritual disciplines are child-rearing and sermon-writing, and she is regularly humbled by both.