

Christ the King Sunday
“They Know Not What They’re Doing”
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 22:33-43
By Rev. Joy Laughridge
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For years after the Israelites entered the promised land, they didn’t have the kind of national political leader that the nations around them had. There were military leaders that God raised up during times of crisis called judges, and the priests provided spiritual and religious guidance, but during the time of Samuel, the people began feeling insecure. They looked around at the nations with powerful kings and decided they wanted one too, so they began pestering Samuel asking him to give them a king.

Samuel didn’t like the idea, but he prayed about it, and the Lord told basically told him *I know you’re upset about this, but listen. It’s not you or your leadership they’re rejecting. They’re rejecting me and my leadership, so here’s what I want you to tell them. Tell them, if you want a king, you need to understand what kings are like. Kings take. They take your sons for their armies, your daughters for their households, your land for their estates. Kings hunger for power and wealth, and they won’t hesitate to exploit their own people to secure those things. You may think having a king will make life safer, but the day will come when you cry out to be delivered from the very king you demanded.*” Samuel went back to the people and told them all this, but despite the clear warning, they insisted, and God allowed Samuel to get them a king.

Today's reading from Jeremiah is a reminder that what the Lord warned the people about turned out to be true. Not every king in Israel's history was terrible, but many of them were. Many were violent, idolatrous, unjust shepherds who led the people away from covenant faithfulness. Jeremiah looked at that long and tumultuous history, but then he spoke a word of hope saying that one day God would give them a different kind of king who would reign with justice and righteousness.

At the beginning of the New Testament, God's people are still waiting for this promised King when "a child is born." When Advent begins next Sunday we go back to that part of the story, but on the last day of the Christian year which is today, the child who was born, no longer a child, is hung on a cross to die like a criminal.

Luke and the other Gospel writers bear witness to the birth, ministry, and teachings of Jesus and show how his disciples came to believe that he is the long-awaited king that Jeremiah and the prophets promised would come, but the Gospels also show that not everyone was convinced of that. For some, his humiliating death was the final bit of evidence that they needed to prove that they had been right all along. There was nothing regal, or glorious, or strong about a man who was being crucified on a cross. He hadn't overcome or displaced the powers. How could someone who couldn't save himself be the one sent from God to save them?

The surprising twist in the story is that it was in all the things that Jesus in all the times throughout his life when Jesus didn't look like or seem like a king – when he was born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes; when he turned from the temptations to grasp at

power or to use his power to serve himself; when he taught his followers to forgive, reject violence, and be peacemakers; when he took on the role of a servant and washed his disciples' feet; when he met the hatred that put him on the cross with mercy and love – in all of those times when he didn't *look* like a king the true nature of his kingship was being revealed. He is a king whose power is not the power that is wielded through force or violence, but the power of self-giving love.

The remarks that Luke records show that the religious leaders, and the soldiers, and even one of thieves who was being crucified next to Jesus did not recognize the King for who he was, and they didn't understand what was happening or what was being accomplished as they watched him die that day, but they certainly seemed to think they had it all figured out, didn't they? It might be easy for those with faith looking back on the scene to say how could they have been so blind, but at some time or another, haven't we all failed to see something that later we realize should have been plain to us? The tendency toward a blinding kind of pride and overconfidence in our own understanding and in our own ability to make accurate judgments is an all-too-common human trait.

Just go back to the story of God's people begging Samuel to let them have a king. We know what we need. We know what is best for us. We know what you should do. Samuel could see the error in their judgment. Both he and the Lord knew that the kings they thought they wanted would bring pain and misery into their lives, but they refused to be convinced, and had to learn the hard way. And of course that wasn't the first time people failed to trust any wisdom other than their own. All the way back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had done

the same thing. They thought, maybe, just maybe, God was wrong, or God was misleading us, or God was withholding something good from us when God said don't eat from this tree. Maybe we don't need God telling us what to do so they chose their own way which ended up leading, again, to painful consequences. From Eden, to the wilderness, to the era of the kings, to the death of Jesus, and all the way up until this very day, people still struggle to admit or believe that we don't always see, or know, or understand as much as we think we do.

In some ways, it's as if we are perpetually teenagers. I don't mean to pick on teenagers because I was once a teenager and they are wonderful developing young humans, but it seems to be universally true that when you're between the ages of about 12 -19, you know *everything*, and for the person in that age range there's no problem with that. In fact, it feels very empowering and gives you the confidence to get out there and do things which is great, but for teachers, or bosses, or parents especially, it can be very frustrating to engage with young people at that stage. Your older and wiser and have a broader perspective. Because you were once a teenager yourself, you already made the mistakes that they are about to make and you just want to help by offering some wisdom and perspective and advice, but it's often not eagerly received and is treated as unnecessary information.

Thankfully, most of us do grow out of that stage. We get better at learning from others and acknowledging that we don't know everything, yet still, it is sometimes difficult to be open-minded, and teachable, and willing to trust others, and if we persist in leaning on our own understanding alone as Proverbs says, we can end up

trapped in darkness or patterns that prevent us from experiencing and receiving things that are good for us. We potentially miss out on the better way because we just don't want to be or don't think we need to be enlightened.

The Gospel of John says that Jesus is the light that gives light to everyone, but the world didn't recognize him. Those who didn't want to be or didn't think they needed to be enlightened ended up putting Jesus, who is the King of Kings, on a cross. As he hung there many mocked him, but Luke does highlight one person who didn't mock Jesus. One of the thieves who was being crucified with Jesus had a different attitude. He listened to the people yelling at Jesus and his own voice broke through with a question. "Don't you fear God?"

Proverbs says, "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." The fear is the kind of reverence and deference that we hold in the presence of someone who is truly great, and wise, and wonderful. If you're meeting with the world's leading expert on a subject, hopefully you don't go into that meeting expecting that you're going to teach the expert something he doesn't know before you listen and learn. To fear the Lord means having reverence for God and having that humility that recognizes that there is a height, and depth, and breadth to the wisdom and knowledge of God that far surpasses our own limited understanding a humble posture before the Lord. When we lean not on our own understanding, but acknowledge the Lord, that is the thing that causes the scales to come off our eyes and can set us free from captivity to our own pride. The thief who feared God serves as the example in this scene at the cross. He shows us the way that leads to seeing, and believing, and it is through seeing and believing

that we receive the mercy and the life-changing truth that Jesus wants to share with us

Those who mocked Jesus remained blind to the truth. During his ministry, Jesus had invited them to trust him and come be part of his kingdom of peace, but they still weren't ready to learn what he had come to teach them about the things that make for peace. They weren't ready to accept the truth of his words or to allow themselves to be challenged or transformed by words. They weren't ready to understand the power of forgiveness and self-giving love, but even so, even while they were still rejecting him and hurling insults at him, Jesus was filled— not with rage, or blame, or hatred. Remarkably, he was filled with compassion as he prayed, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I find Jesus' prayer to be incredibly comforting because I'm pretty sure that there are a lot of times when I have no idea what I'm doing even if I think I do. Those words are the good news for me and for others like me who are not immune to the possibility of being overconfident in our own judgments, or unwilling at times to see what we don't want or think we need to see. It is for those who have yet to embrace the fear of God that enables us to recognize Jesus as King of Kings and gives us courage to trust him as the Lord of Lords. It is also for those of us who do recognize him as such, but still find it a struggle to submit ourselves to him daily in everything and live as if we really believe that his way is the way to life.

We might jokingly say, “the Lord knows I don't know it all and I don't always get things right,” but it's not really a joke. The Lord does know that, but we need to know it, too. To know it means to know our

need – the need we have to be led, and taught, and corrected, and forgiven for the times when we go astray. And we don't need to be afraid to admit our need because it is when we humble ourselves and admit it, that the Lord's mercy floods into our lives to give us exactly what he knows we need. May we open ourselves to that mercy. May we learn to trust our King more fully and freely submit to his way which is the way that is always good and always leads to life. Amen.