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Homily | Feast of Christ the King (Jeremiah 23.1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43)
21 November 2010

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the final Sunday of the church's annual calendar—the *Feast of Christ the King*. It is, one might say, a New Year's Eve of sorts. We are invited to prepare for the long road ahead by reflecting upon life's journey over the prior year.

Allow me to suggest a question that I believe is important considering this occasion.

Why are you here? Why am I here? If we had to answer this question for someone, who perhaps found our ways alien and strange, our convictions misinformed, what would we say? Each week we gather here and say our prayers; we read from Holy Scripture; recite corporately the Church's historic creeds and confessions; we kneel before the alter-table to receive and partake of the elements of bread and wine. Yet I continually find myself asking *why*, what motivates us to return to this place again and again?

At first glance, today's account from the Gospel of St. Luke seems a strange if not an inappropriate place to conclude our cycle of readings, and an even stranger place to mark our celebration of Christ's abiding kingship. We're summoned to rehearse again the brutal content of Holy Week, where we behold the crucified Jesus, hanging alongside two haggard criminals, one on his right and one on his left. The bewildered apostles are nowhere to be found, and we're left struggling to discern Jesus' identity without disclosing our confusion and growing disbelief – “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One” (Luke 23.35 RSV).

Jesus' death calls to mind the entirety of his young life because we are left wondering what it was all for.

We glimpse a newborn child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying restless in a wooden manger. An eastern star once led us through the long night to Bethlehem in Judea, where, in a crude stable surrounded by oxen and bleating goats, we hailed the coming of a foreign king, whose perfect kingdom prophets foretold.

And viewing him with young Mary his mother, we fell down and worshipped the sleeping babe, praying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth, good will towards men” (Luke 2.14 RSV; Christmas Day I). We rejoiced exceedingly with great joy at the sight of this infant light faintly flickering in the night. It appeared suddenly, as from a great distance, breaking in upon the plain of our failing vision—God with us, in the very midst of this mortal life.

We also glimpse Jesus as a young man, “increasing in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Isa 53.2; Luke 2.52 NRSV; Second Sunday after Christmas). He was led out by the Spirit into the wilderness east of the Jordan to be tempted forty days and nights. He offered prayers like “incense burnt before God in solitude,”¹ and emerged from the desert proclaiming the advent of

¹ Benedicta Ward's *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987).

God's upside down kingdom—the poor are rich, the blind see; the lame walk, and the captives go free. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he announced. “He has anointed me...to proclaim the [favorable] year of the Lord...; Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 4.18, 19; 3.5-6 RSV; Third Sunday after Epiphany).

We glimpse the many miracles performed by Jesus. He cleansed lepers and forgave sinners; he walked upon the waves of the deep and cast out demons. He fed multitudes with a handful of fish and a few barley loaves; he raised the dead to newness of life.

We glimpse Jesus with Peter, James, and John, high up upon a mountain, where Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light...and a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt 17.1-2, 5 RSV; cf. Luke 9.28-36; Last Sunday After Epiphany).

We glimpse Jesus traveling to Jerusalem one final time and entering the city triumphantly. Great crowds clamored about to catch a glimpse of Jesus riding a lowly foal. They frantically approached him along the busy thoroughfare, and with waving palm branches, cried out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (John 12.13 RSV; cf. Luke 19.28-40; Palm Sunday & Monday in Holy Week).

We glimpse Jesus standing in their midst and addressed them: “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen ... I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life...I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness ... The light is with you for a little longer. Walk, then, while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going ... While I am in the world, I am the light of the world ... Therefore, believe in the light, that you may become children of light” (Matt 13.9; John 8.12; 12.46; 9.5; 12.35-6 RSV).

Yet we glimpse Jesus betrayed with a kiss (Luke 22.47-8). Roman soldiers plucked out his beard and spit in his bloodied face. They placed a hedge-crown upon his head and led him away to die at Golgotha. There, in the sun's failing light, they hung Jesus alongside two haggard criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Soldiers cast lots to divide his garments, and rulers scoffed at Jesus – “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One” (Luke 23.35 RSV)

And so we're back where we began, a bit perplexed by the reading of Christ's passion on this final Sunday in Ordinary Time, with our initial question still lingering—*why are we here? What unites us in faith and fellowship?*

The answer to this question, I believe, lies specifically in St. Luke's desire to view the entirety of Jesus' life through the lens of the cross. The cross is the perfect expression of Jesus' self-giving love, the center towards which everything points. Each act of love done by Jesus participates in this final act that is greater still. For through death Jesus conquers death; he gathers it up into himself entire, thereby renewing all of life for communion with God.

St. Luke invites his audience to live as witnesses bound together by a common confession of hope in God, whose eternal glory is manifest chiefly in his promise to abide with humanity in the midst of their mortal life. God became human—the very God through whom and for whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth; the very God who is before all things and in whom all things hold together. Yet this God-man was pleased not simply to live as one of us, but also and primarily to die, thereby manifesting his power through selfless love.

Today's account from the Gospel of St. Luke is the most suitable for a celebration of Christ's abiding kingship. On this final Sunday of the year, we are invited to prepare for the long road ahead by reviewing life's journey over the prior year—where have we been; which moments were most significant and why; who have we loved well and who have we neglected; where have we seen beauty and fought to sustain it; where have we failed and why?

By reviewing the entirety of Jesus' life through the lens of the cross, St. Luke calls us to review our own lives, both individually and corporately.

He invites us to assess all that we are and aspire to become – to be people who live in view of the ultimate triumph of God's love over despair. In our moments of distress and weakness, unavoidable as they are, we discover the overwhelming extent of our need for healing and wholeness. Yet much to our dismay, we also learn that the source of help cannot come from within ourselves but only by our acknowledgement of and consent to a greater grace, a grace that hems us in and sustains our life from beginning to end—the bloodied cross of Christ being the greatest articulation of this grace.

We are here not because Christ promises to take away or remove our struggles, whatever they may be, but because of his promised to remain with us in the very midst of them, to be our companion in the way. St. Luke draws our attention always back to the cross, where God chose to share in our anguish by participating in our sufferings.

The Christian life is a journey that points beyond itself to the journey of another, namely, Jesus Christ, who traversed the infinite gulf between eternity and time “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Amen.