

Arnhem-Nijmegen, 24th of November 2019. Christ the King Sunday.

Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Ps. 46, Col. 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43.

Am I the only one for whom Christ the King Sunday comes with mixed feelings? Of course, we do believe that Christ is king over all creation; that he is reigning gloriously over our world, over all history. We believe in Christ as the ruler of the universe, sitting at the right hand of the Father. And of course it is a cause of joy and celebration and hope.

On the other hand, we often struggle with the nature of his kingship. While I was working on this sermon, I received a few distressing emails from several people who are going through an extremely difficult time. At some point I decided to rewrite part of the sermon, because it just didn't ring true anymore. All that suffering, human lives sometimes broken beyond repair. What does it mean that Christ is king? Where is the glory, where is the victory?

Some of this tension is apparent in today's choice of hymns. We started with the joyful song of praise to the king of heaven, but Graham Kendrick's hymn about the Servant-King has already reminded us that there is another side to this. And the same tension is there in today's readings.

Jeremiah speaks of the just and righteous rule of David's descendant, when all Judah and Israel will be saved and live in safety. Well, look at the situation in the Middle East today; it's hard to reconcile that with Jeremiah's promise. Even if we understand Judah and Israel as metaphors for the NT church – again, look at the situation today. Many Christians are persecuted and oppressed for their faith, and the church itself is divided and torn, and not exactly a harmonious and peaceful place.

Then we have the Psalm, Psalm 46. A Psalm full of contrasts, that do not always seem to match up. The nations are in uproar – yes, we can only agree. God is our refuge – certainly, but then he is also the one who has brought all this desolation on the earth. We are told that he makes wars to cease, breaking bows and shattering spears. And indeed, wars do come to an end, but at the same time others break out elsewhere. And the damages of war can take generations to heal, if they ever do. In all this, is God really exalted among the nations? You have to look hard to find traces of his kingdom amidst all the misery and injustice in the world.

Let us turn to the epistle reading. The reading from Colossians is one of my favourite passages in the Bible – I even once tried to write a hymn about it, but the attempt is still hidden away in a drawer somewhere. Now here we finally seem to encounter Jesus Christ in all his regal glory. I just have to read parts of it to you again, it is so triumphant and glorious, and beautiful poetry at that. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible (...) – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (...) For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.'

Wow. Now there is a cosmic ruler for you. But the question remains: what does it mean, in the light of the ongoing brokenness of the world? How does it help us?

Over the past year I have read several books written by Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr. He has helped me no end to explore the depths and the meaning of the incarnation. For him, too, Colossians 1 is highly significant, as it points to an ultimate and all-compassing wholeness. All creation is in Christ and Christ is in all creation. Rohr refers to Christ as 'the Blueprint of all creation', the one we have to look to if we are trying to make sense of it all. I remember reading his book *The Universal Christ* on the Eurostar to London, after a particularly difficult time. When I looked up for a moment to let his words sink in, the whole landscape suddenly flooded with light. I felt comforted and at peace, and the universe suddenly seemed a very safe place. Christ is there. In him everything holds together.

But let us not be too hasty here and only pay attention to the words we like. You will have noticed that I skipped some of the passage, and I will amend that now: through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross. There is blood involved. There is a cross involved. He is the firstborn from the dead – but of course that means that he had died. That's where today's gospel reading comes in. Jesus is crucified as the King of the Jews. He is enthroned on a cross. If ever it became clear that his kingship was problematic, than it is here. It does not fit the expectations and models of the world. We believe that it was the cross where Jesus's kingship was established and earned, but it is more than that. It also tells us what kind of king we are dealing with.

The cross is and remains the centre of Jesus's kingship. It is not a nasty episode that is way behind him in the past. It is the pattern of his rule, the pattern of his kingdom, the pattern of reality. I have come to realize more and more that his sacrifice of self-giving love for his creation is ongoing. The cross is just the moment in time when it becomes visible in our human history.

His cross is the firm, unifying factor, the way in which he prevents the universe from falling apart completely; the way in which he brings all creation to its fulfilment. Where promises of safety are fulfilled. Where wars will cease. Where paradise will be opened to criminals. Where all things are reconciled to God. If we feel torn and divided, we can be sure that Jesus will hold us together. We will be whole in the end. And what applies to us personally, also applies to the world and even to the universe as a whole. That is the nature of his kingship.

What a change in mindset we need to grasp this. I doubt we ever will fully understand. Jesus's kingship and suffering go hand in hand. We can never separate the two. We can never think about the cross being comfortably in the past, and his kingship being comfortably in the present and the future.

There is one line in the passage in Colossians that still needs our attention: verse 18 tells us that he is the head of the body, the church. This is another thing that keeps fascinating and moving me. Because what does it tell us? Head and body are one, of course. And if Christ's suffering is an ongoing suffering, his body will certainly feel it. We share in his sufferings and he suffers in and with us. We are part of his ministry to bring creation to wholeness and

fulfilment. This is what we are doing when we tend the sick, comfort the dying, labour for justice and peace, work for reconciliation and forgiveness, reach out to the poor. It's not just that it is our duty as faithful Christians to lead a good and exemplary life. It is our glory to take part in Christ's healing ministry, and being prepared to pay a price for it. It is sharing in this strange kingship of his, that is marked by humility and sacrificial service. By willingness to feel the pain and the brokenness. This is the divine pattern for true kingship. May we all reflect it, and in doing so enthrone Christ in our hearts as king.

*Christ has no body now but yours;
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he sees,
Yours are the feet with which he walks,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are his hands...*
(Teresa of Avila)