

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:35-43

Introduction. This Sunday is called *Christ the King Sunday* in many parts of the Anglican Communion but also the *Feast of Christ the King*. It may sound like an ancient tradition of the Church but it was only instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and was celebrated on the last Sunday in October. The festival was moved to the last Sunday before Advent, its current position, in 1970. Placed at the end of the Church liturgical year, the festival proclaims Messiah Jesus – Christ the King – as the goal of both biblical and human history. This provides the perfect bridge between the mundanity of Ordinary time and the heightened expectations of Lent.

Common Theme. The theme that comes through in every reading is that of Christ the King. Jeremiah gives a precious prophecy concerning the Messiah (Jer 23:1-6). Zechariah sings praises in honour of the Messiah (Luke 1:68-79). Paul waxes lyrical about the supremacy of Christ (Col 1:11-20). Luke gives much detail about the sneers, mockery and signage that revolves around Messianic allegations and the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23:35-43). Psalm 46 is a bit of an outlier in the ACNA readings but also involves tensions to do with the Messianic Age.

Jeremiah 23:1-6. The opening verses of Jeremiah 23 carry a familiar theme not confined to the prophet Jeremiah alone but also shared with Ezekiel (Ezek 34). Both prophets speak out against the failure of Israel's leadership, likening them to shepherds, an ancient image for rulers found across the Near East. God promises through the prophet Jeremiah to place shepherds over his flock who will tend them so that the sheep will no longer be afraid (Jer 23:1-4). The prophet Ezekiel is even more specific with the shepherd metaphor. He shares that God himself will be the good shepherd ruling over Israel. God will look after his sheep and rescue them from where they are scattered (Ezek 34:12). God will tend them in good pasture and make them lie down (Ezek 34:15), echoing the same personification of Psalm 23. God will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak (Ezek 34:16). Jeremiah does not expound about shepherds and sheep to the same extent as Ezekiel, although he does reference them on several other occasions (see Jer 10:21; 50:6-7, 17). Instead, Jeremiah in 23:5-6 gives a most precious prophecy concerning the Messiah.

The use of the term "branch" and mention of the royal house of David by Jeremiah in verse 5 carries strong Messianic resonances. Jeremiah promises the fulfilment of the gracious promise God made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah, saying "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line." The Targum of Jeremiah renders the interpretation as "I will raise up for David the Messiah the Just" and is a key passage from which the ancient rabbis derived one of the names of the Messiah.¹ The same concept of the branch is not limited to Jeremiah but appears in Isaiah 4:2 where the Branch of the Lord is described as being beautiful and glorious. Later in Isaiah 11:1, the Branch is said to come from the stump or stem of Jesse, again a reference to

¹ Mark Eastman, Chapter 3: Birth, Lineage and Mission of Messiah,
https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/eastman_mark/messiah/sfm_03.cfm

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

the royal house of David as Jesse was the father of King David. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) picks up on the Messianic connotations of this passage:

And if you say, 'Here are consolations for Hezekiah and his people, that they shall not fall into his hands. Now what will be with the exile that was exiled to Halah and Habor, is their hope lost?' It is not lost! Eventually, the King Messiah shall come and redeem them.²

Zechariah makes this link to a person, stating that the Branch will be a person, a servant of the Lord (Zech 3:8). Furthermore, Zechariah says that the man whose name is Branch will “branch out from this place and build the temple of the Lord” (Zech 6:12). The figure is a remarkable king-priest as Zechariah describes the Branch as one “clothed with majesty” who will “sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne” (Zech 6:13). The earliest followers of Jesus would make the startling claim that he was this Branch, the Root of Jesse, the Messiah, the Christ. Indeed, it is a claim that is made to this day.

Luke 1:68-79 (replaces the Psalm). Zechariah's song is truly remarkable. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit (v. 67). Notwithstanding being under oppressive Roman rule, praise, thanksgiving and joy bubble to the surface throughout. In particular, there is thanksgiving for the Messiah (vv. 68-70), the promise of a great deliverance (vv. 71-75), affirmation of Zechariah's son's role (vv. 76-77) and returning again to the theme of Messianic hope, the hope of salvation (vv. 78-79). Tom Wright beautifully writes:

It's a poem about God acting at last, and doing it at a time when his people had had their fill of hatred and oppression. One evil empire after another had trampled them underfoot; now at last God was going to give them deliverance. We can feel the long years of pain and sorrow, of darkness and death, overshadowing his mind...but we can also feel the long years of quiet prayer and trust.³

The Song of Zechariah is well known by many beyond the pages of scripture. It is called the *Benedictus* for its opening line in Latin and is used around the world, certainly in the Anglican way, in the order of morning prayers or matins. The daily discipline of saying the *Benedictus* places ordinary believers in the same position as Zechariah, praising God, being thankful, holding onto the promised Messiah come rain or shine, good times or bad, in times of freedom or oppression. This is important as Wright also comments:

But Luke's story vibrates equally with the personal hopes and fears of ordinary people. Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary stand out as real people, hesitating between faith and doubt, called to trust God at a new moment in history. It's a mark not only of Luke's skill as a writer

² Rashi on Isaiah, English translation by I.W.Slotki, Soncino Press, 1949 (Accessed through <https://www.sefaria.org/>)

³ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

but also the nature of the God he is writing about that both the big picture and the smaller human stories matter totally.⁴

The bigger picture matters to God. You matter.

Colossians 1:11-20. Paul is both praying and promising that something truly remarkable has happened in Messiah Jesus. God's power has delivered us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son he loves (v. 13). That same power that has done a mighty saving work is also at work in us so that we may grow in the knowledge of God and have endurance and patience (vv. 10-11). Paul cannot contain himself about the supremacy of the Messiah. Some commentators think that the form this takes indicates that Paul has included an early Christian hymn. Others dispute this saying it is unlikely that a hymn would start with the words "He is the image of the invisible God". Yet others think Paul has "taken a leaf out of the book of the ancient prophets to counter the imperial imagination with radical and evocative poetry".⁵ Probably most well-known is Tom Wright who has poetically rendered the passage based on the different Hebrew meanings for 'head'.⁶ Whether a statement, an early hymn or an evocative poem, Paul is exploiting some of these different meanings for 'head' saying that Messiah Jesus is: the firstborn (vv. 15, 18), supreme (v. 17), the head and the beginning (v. 18).

Wright also notes that the different sections balance each other out. The first section ("He is the image of the invisible God...the firstborn...") is balanced by the later section ("He is the beginning...the firstborn...") with the middle part looking back and forward at the same time. Wright thinks that these six verses (vv. 15-20) "are generally, and rightly, reckoned among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament."

Luke 23:33-43. All the Gospel writers focus on the significance of Jesus' death rather than on the physical horrors he endured. Luke mentions he was crucified (v. 32) but provides no detail about the method. He notes that Jesus was crucified with a criminal to his left and to his right (v. 33), something that all the Gospel writers also mention. It matters that Jesus was executed among criminals as a criminal of sorts. His alleged crime is evident in the sneers of the Jewish authorities (v. 35), the mockery of the Roman soldiers (vv. 36-37), the sign placed above his head (v. 38) and the insults from one of the criminals (v. 39):

- "He saved others. Let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."
- "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

⁴ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*.

⁵ J.W. Walsh and S.C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: SPCK, 2002).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

- “This is the King of the Jews.”
- “Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

Jesus responds with incredible grace to those who sought to mock him, doubt him and even kill him, saying “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34). Equally moving, Jesus extends mercy to the God-fearing criminal dying next to him. This criminal recognises something those others failed to see (v. 41: “this man has done nothing wrong”), he rebukes the other criminal and turns to Jesus, asking to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom (v. 42). The God-fearing criminal saw through the eyes of faith that Jesus was not only the Messiah, the King of the Jews, but perhaps even something greater. That there was something extraordinary happening in an ordinary execution, the hint of divine purposes and significance. The God-fearing criminal's hope-filled statement makes no logical sense, because death (ordinarily) is final, the end of earth-bound kingdom movements. A dead messiah is a failed messiah, another victim of Roman oppression and power. Yet Jesus acknowledges there is something greater at hand. He responds with a sense of agency and purpose saying, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). The grace and mercy of Messiah Jesus is still extended to those who mock and doubt him as well as to the God-fearing sinner who turns to seek refuge with the King in his eternal kingdom.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 46. Psalm 46 is a beautiful affirmation of God's protecting presence (v. 1). The psalmist has tremendous confidence in God and lacks fear in the face of possible disasters (vv. 2-3). For God can intervene to make wars cease (v. 9) and is the fortress of God's people (v. 11). Central to this confidence is the idea that God is present in Jerusalem and will not let it fall (vv. 4-5). The obvious problem from the viewpoint of history is that Jerusalem did fall, and more than once.

The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem, and in March 597 BCE the city surrendered, resulting in many significant citizens being deported. This marked the start of the Jewish diaspora. An insurrection a decade later resulted in the Babylonians besieging Jerusalem for a second time, ending with the destruction of both the city and the temple. Thereafter there have been numerous sieges of Jerusalem by the Seleucids, Hasmoneans, Romans (they destroyed the temple for the second time in 70 CE), Rashiduns, Crusaders, Saladin's army, Khwarezmians and on the list goes. Jerusalem, which means “City of Peace”, has never been at peace for long. Simon Sebag Montefiore wryly remarks that

Jerusalem has a way of disappointing and tormenting both conquerors and visitors. The crisis between the real and heavenly cities is so excruciating that a hundred patients a year are committed to the city's asylum, suffering from the Jerusalem Syndrome, a madness of anticipation, disappointment and delusion.⁷

⁷ S. Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2011).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Last Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

But what to do with the disappointment? Arie Folder has seen that the tension is resolved in Jewish thinking in several ways.⁸ First, that the city in this psalm is not the historical Jerusalem but a Jerusalem in the end of days, divinely protected in the Messianic Age (Rashi and Radak take this approach). Second, that it's not a physical place at all but a spiritual Jerusalem where the Torah survives throughout all generations (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, for example, argues for this). Third, that the tension can be lived with (Amos Hakham sees the psalm as reflecting both the historical past and the future Final Redemption). The challenge remains the same for all of us who read, sing or pray Psalm 46: To trust in God and not live in fear of possible disasters when reality sometimes says otherwise.

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⁸ A. Folder, "Understanding Psalm 46", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2013, pp 35 – 43.