

Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Divine

Newgate Street

St. John's, Antigua

The Last Sunday after Pentecost:

Christ the King (C)

Proper 29 (C)

November 24, 2019

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Some last words”

The Gospel: Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of

the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Dear Lord, Please remember us as you sit on Father God's right hand in kingdom of heaven. Amen.

This story from the Gospel according to Luke gives two of Jesus' last 'words' from the cross. But when one looks at who all are talking, we see, "the leaders scoffed," the soldiers 'mocked', a criminal 'derided', and very few wanted to hear the actual last words of the Messiah of the whole

world. Humanity's ears were closed to a last message from heaven to earth.

Jesus does two acts of mercy with his very last breaths: One: he asks his heavenly Father to “forgive them for they know not what they do”, and Two: he gives ultimate pardon to the penitent thief, saying, “today you will be with me in Paradise.” That one criminal and only that one criminal of all the multitude of witnesses there, only that one person spoke up for Jesus, telling the other criminal, “Do you not fear

God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” But that one person received what the whole world really wanted and needed, to get to Paradise at our end. No else bothered to plea for the most desired gift in all human history, to get to Paradise. Is not this the one final and best gift we all want to have, to be with God and God’s Son in Paradise? Ultimately, all human

endeavor boils down to that one goal, to find paradise at the end of our lives, it is not? We may get a capital city named for us, George Washington did. We may get a state capital named for us, Abraham Lincoln did; we may get a vaccine we invented named for us; we may get a street named for us, or a tree on a golf course, or maybe some bronze plaque somewhere emblazoning our accomplishment at finding an ancient trail, but one day all of these earthly things will finally disappear in a few or millions of years. And all that

is left is whether we made it to our ultimate goal, Paradise. Where will we be at our end? Where will we be at our end?

If you could ask Jesus for one and only one thing, what would it be? I suspect that criminal on the cross figured it all out, and just in time. He had a few breaths left to ask for the ultimate goal in life, to have a blessed end and beginning of an eternal life with the Savior of the whole world now and forever.

It seems to me that we all are often chasing some goal that we are sure will make us happy. It may be having a happy marriage and wonderful friendships. It may be raising our family or grandkids. It may be success in this or that profession. It may be happiness, wealth, beauty, fulfillment—whatever--but ultimately we generally focus way to much on the here and now without hardly a thought for the hereafter. What do you think?

I personally think the penitent thief got it right when he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” What more could we want?

This version of the crucifixion of Christ is the last one recorded, according to today’s biblical scholars. This Gospel according to Luke appeared ‘in print’ about 110 to 120 AD, perhaps one of the last writings to be included in our New Testament. I

like Luke for that reason; he seems to be trying to summarize up all that he had researched about the life of Jesus Christ; he apparently had a wealthy person who supported his research, and I think Luke, whatever his real name is, that Luke did a marvelous job in putting the life of Christ in perspectives. Only Luke gives a sense of how lowly Christ and his followers were. In this gospel Jesus seems to wander from town to town, not knowing where they would sleep this night, or the next night, or the next.

The precious Bethlehem manger scene is unique to Luke, as is scene of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary to let her know she would be the bearer of the Savior of the world. But one of the endearing features of Luke, I feel, is that Jesus gives forgiveness to all of us for the sins we will commit and have committed. And in Luke's gospel, Jesus final words on earth before his crucifixion was his welcoming the criminal into his presence in Paradise; Jesus was fortunately not carrying any grudges against humankind, and Jesus

forgave even the worst, regardless of his sins.

Luke's gospel is also unique in it is the only gospel who refers to Jesus as a physician, rather than a carpenter: Luke 4:23 says, "Jesus said to them, 'Surely you will quote this proverb to me: "Physician, heal yourself!"'" It is remarkable that the word, 'carpenter', does not appear in Luke's gospel as a description of Jesus as it does in Mark's and Matthew's gospels. And indeed, someone has calculated the

number of times Jesus was healing people, about seventy percent of his life. Jesus as a healer seems to be the one or at least one of key things he was most noted for, and for which people came in droves to see him and to be healed by him. And in Jesus's last words from the cross he healed all humanity by giving us forgiveness. What a statement Luke has made, emphasized by Jesus very last words of forgiveness for the criminal hanging beside him on his own cross. Jesus mended the fence between God and us.

A famous television church person when I was growing up was Archbishop Fulton Sheen; there is in fact a move nowadays to beatify him: Archbishop Sheen reflected on the latter days, his own latter days and commented:

“I am certain that there will be three surprises in heaven.

“First of all, I will see some people there [in heaven] whom I never expected to see.

“Second, there will be a number whom I expect to be there who will not be there.

“And, even relying on [God’s] mercy, the biggest surprise of all may be that I will be there.

Who do you expect to see in Paradise?

One person in particular will be this criminal who hung beside Jesus; this wayward man will let you know that you have made it; you are in Paradise.

Who else will be there? Except for this one person, there is no way we can know, but of course we speculate.

What I wonder is who would I like to be there that is still alive today? How can I help them to find their way to Paradise? Whom can I influence with my own life? Whom can I inspire with my love? Think about that. Whom can I inspire with my own life to come to Paradise to be with our Lord?

Can you imagine the stress Christ was having as he hung on that cross—

the pain, the agony, the labored breathing—doctors say he was slowly suffocating, that he would actually die of suffocation; his diaphragm would simply ‘give out’ due to his tortuous position hanging for hours in the hot sun of Israel, under the sign that said, “King of the Jews.” What a king, hung on a cross, on a skull of a hill, forsaken by all, and alone except for this one person who spoke up for him and asked for his mercy. It was a seemingly little thing, to ask for assurance for the hereafter. What right did he have to do

that, a sinner, condemned to death for his sins, but hanging beside the one who will grant any who ask an eternal day in Paradise. To whom else can we ourselves offer this great gift of eternal forgiveness today?

Amen.

Some last words

Description: Only Christ keeps his calmness at his death, offering forgiveness for all who do not know what they are doing, and giving a free transit with him to Paradise to those who ask. Whom can we influence to take Jesus ticket?

Tags: Paradise, Jesus, Christ, God, criminal, death, diaphragm, suffocate, cross, Israel, forgiveness, love, physician, heal, Luke, gospel

Here is a second sermon:

Today is the end of the church year, the last Sunday of the season after Pentecost. Next Sunday we begin the church year anew with Advent. But today we look back over the life of Christ and see how it turned out, the life of our Christ framed tragically in crucifixion, ended painfully in martyrdom, and appearing dreadfully

lonely except for two criminals hanging beside him on their own crosses. It seemed the worst possible end. However, we resurrection people know better. Christ rose from the dead, the first of many others, all of whom are his followers. And we have been given joint ownership with the Son of God of a place in the heavenly realm where Christ reigns supreme with his Father.

It actually was not so unique for one of Israel's kings to die an early

death. Several kings faced that fate of early death due to wars, subterfuge or jealousy. The Old Testament prophets noted how this king and then that one disobeyed God's commands, and their downward fate seemed sealed as a result. But Jesus was quite different from all those other kings of Israel. Most importantly, he never disobeyed any of God's commands. Jesus was never recognized as a head of state. He never led an armed band of soldiers. Jesus was as poor as a church mouse, even having to have one of his

disciples fish for a coin inside a fish's mouth in order to pay the temple tax. As for being a king, he had none of the usual credentials of royalty. His mother Mary had probably been an underage teenager. His father Joseph did not have enough connections in his hometown to provide an indoor room for him and his pregnant wife at the time of Jesus' birth. And the only employment Jesus was known to have had during his lifetime was as a lowly but skilled manual laborer, a carpenter. He was not educated in any school that

we know of; his only learning seemed to come from reading Old Testament scrolls and discussing what he had understood with a few Temple teachers. Even his hometown of Nazareth was not known as a source for any famous men or women in all of Israel's history--recall in the gospel of John when Andrew tells Nathanael about Jesus, and Nathanael comments, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In other words, Jesus had no pedigree, no victory in battle, no wealth, none of the resources

characteristic of a king. Yet Pontius Pilate required the soldiers to affix a sign above Jesus' head as he hung on the cross, a sign that called Jesus, "King of the Jews" written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. The sign itself was an affront to the Jewish religious leaders who challenged Pilate's impetuous affront to them to name Christ as being their king. They challenged Pilate's regal designation of Jesus by saying that they had "no king but Caesar." The very people Jesus was to have ruled over wanted to have

nothing to do with him. And indeed in a private conversation between Pilate and Jesus before his sentencing, Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not an earthly kingdom in the first place.

Jesus himself never made a claim of being “king of the Jews” or the king of anyone or anything or anywhere on earth. Jesus would probably even challenge some today who call him, “king of the universe,” as the universe will one day disappear; the universe itself is a transient entity in the mind of God that one day will cease to exist.

But Christ will still reign supreme with his Father in heaven regardless of what happens to this universe, and the stars and the planets therein. Some Mormon teachings place Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit on various planets throughout the universe, so in their theology that would mean Jesus could indeed be “king of the universe.” But for us more orthodox Christians, that cannot be the true situation. Jesus is not somewhere ‘up there’ in the sky somehow physically looking down upon us from some distant planet or

solar system. Jesus is far beyond this universe, and yet Jesus the Christ is still King of kings and Lord of lords; and after our death ultimately all of us will come before Christ's throne in heaven for judgment.

Pope Pius XI in 1925 designated the last Sunday of October, later transferred to the last Sunday of the church year, as being the feast day of Christ the King. In that year of 1925 Hitler had just been released from prison, and fascism was primed to

begin its ominous rise. A world tilt toward an effort of imperial domination by the Nazis was just beginning to show its ugly head. And the Pope somewhat naively perhaps wanted to firmly establish the Church's view of the primacy of Christ in all things. Regardless of this vain attempt at titular supremacy, a later Pope would be swallowed by Mussolini's domination of Europe with Hitler. But the concept of Christ as king stuck and has remained a widely celebrated feast day in the liturgical year. Symbolically

many crucifixes today picture Jesus with a crown and other regal attire standing erect on a cross, a Jesus who is not a suffering servant but a confident, victorious King. Indeed, Jesus' command of the situation even as he hung there dying on the cross evidenced such a kingly demeanor. Jesus grants asylum to one criminal hanging beside him and passage for him into Paradise. The pain of Jesus' torture did not lessen his self-assessment or diminish his self-understanding. Jesus Christ acted on

his cross as a ruler of all eternity,
granting the penitent criminal the way
that very day into the heavenly realm
of the presence of God the Father.

We Americans have a history of an
early and decisive conflict with a king.
As a result, the concept of Christ the
King Sunday sits a bit uneasily with us,
although one survey not long ago
found that about ten percent of
Americans would still prefer a king
rather than a President. We do have a
fascination with things royal. And

some even see our system of presidential rule as being that of a ‘temporary king’ with nearly ultimate power in the President’s hands if he also has significant control of the legislative process. It is a system that causes many today to have severe misgivings about the immense dominance of their government.

Jesus himself never claimed earthly authority, as such power would be unquestioned, complete, and without limit. And there would be no room for

human freedom or human choice.

Indeed, the ultimate underpinnings of the Christian message are that we, we, have final power over how we live our lives. We do not live as automatons controlled like marionettes pulled by strings connected to God's hand. We have freedom to sin, and we have freedom to seek forgiveness, and we have freedom to turn our lives around to face God. But those are our choices. We can chose to live with God or to live against God. But the freedom of choice is ours. Others may kill the

body, as they did Christ's. But they will ultimately have to answer to God for what they have done. But for us, the decision for or against the Almighty will be the determining factor of our terminal fate, or our final happiness.

Christ the king of heaven calls us today to turn from our wicked ways and come to him in penitence upon our knees, seeking the only forgiveness that has meaning, forgiveness for our many sins. Christ stands in our hearts

today as the king of heaven, beckoning us to come to the home he has prepared for us, to come back to him, to return to his ways. We ignore him at our own peril. Or we accept him with open hearts and minds in order to find a better place, a home in his kingdom, a life of joy that has no end. Let us seek the compassionate arms of our Lord and Savior today. He stands beckoning to us as our only true king. Amen.