

Sermon: Christ the King 2020
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
22 November 2020
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Ephesians 1:15-23
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25:31-46
Psalm 100

Today is the last Sunday in the Church Year, Christ the King Sunday, a sort of New Year's Eve celebration before Advent. Christ the King Sunday which was created by the Pope in 1925 who hoped for a revival of faith among Roman Catholics.

Years later the Lutherans began celebrating it and then we took it up.

I confess I have mixed feelings about it stemming from my resistance to monarchical images based on the abuse of power earthly kings have wielded over others.

Jesus never went around claiming or pretending to be a king. The core of his message was consistently the kingdom or reign of God, not as a monarch, but as an alternative way of being in the world, perceiving reality through the lens of love.

Monarchies can be about love of power. Jesus was always about the power of love.

Remember all those parables that begin with the words "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Mustard seeds that grow into great sheltering trees; bridesmaids wise enough to have oil in their lamps so they can see when God comes along; the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to search for the one lost or the treasure buried in a field that it is worth everything to dig up. They are all about love, every one.

Everything Jesus said or did pointed to the reign of God both awaiting us and already surrounding us, a promise based on just one thing, the power of God's

transforming love—within us, around us, among us—here, now.

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said "if it's not about love, it's not about God," a Kingdom statement if ever there was one.

How do we live into this kingdom of God's love? That is today's question.

Today's Gospel gives us a clue: the reign of God is when we see hungry people and give them food, welcome the stranger into our midst, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in any kind of prison. The challenge is to see the needy and to help them, but

we don't always see, do we—both the needy and the reasons underlying their needs.

We care about them, but don't always see them, our vision clouded by the pressures of worry about our own situation especially in this pandemic, the culture of violence we live in, the challenge of loving those whose values we don't share.

Living into God's reign is not easy for any of us for it means not sitting in judgment of others, forgiving when we'd rather hold a grudge, speaking truth to power when we see exploitation of the poor and indifference to suffering by political leaders.

Not easy, and if you are like me, I need glimpses of the kingdom from time to time to assure me that God's reign is real—alive and well in me and around me—so I can go on.

In her book, *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper offers these hopeful words:

Evidence of the presence of the Kingdom of God is thick wherever and whenever people stand on the promise of God that there is more to this world—more to this life—than what we see. There is more than the getting over, getting by, getting mine. There is more than the brokenness, the destruction, and the despair that threaten to wash over us like the waters of the deep. There is vision of a world where God cuts through the chaos, where God speaks and there is light. There is a vision where there is protection and where love is binding every relationship together. [p205]

As a prelude to Advent on this Christ the King Sunday I suggest that each of us reflect on times when we've had glimpses of God's reign (and we all have!) and to share them.

Just remembering isn't enough; we need to tell these wonderful stories.

So, here is one of mine:

In 2015 I visited China with some of my college classmates, one of whom had spent much of her life investigating ancient flagstone roads that had once been part of the Silk Route.

We walked the remnants of those roads, constructed by laborers hauling the heavy stones mile upon mile. We stayed in old Chinese inns where upstairs rooms were accessed by ladders; we feasted on foods we'd never encountered in Chinese restaurants. We visited lovely Buddhist temples and lovely gardens.

We met a farming family who lived in an old house with dirt floors, a wood stove and a huge TV satellite dish outside. Chickens roamed about; their water buffalo was tethered nearby awaiting the season to plough.

Our leader had written a book about those roads that had attracted the attention of Chinese scholars and tourist interests, so we were accompanied by a film crew of young people making a documentary. A couple of them spoke English so our travels were enhanced by their presence and friendliness.

One day we visited a brand new Buddhist facility that the townspeople were very proud of. It was about the size of a baseball field with gilded statues and pagodas, and large open spaces for crowds to gather—a Buddhist theme park—used for weddings and other celebrations. A small stream flowed through the center where we gathered on a covered bridge overlooking the entire place.

Rain clouds were gathering.

Our leader introduced a young woman who would tell us about the facility, adding that the young woman was a Christian. Having seen almost no evidence of Christianity in China, that caught my interest. When she finished her explanation I stepped forward saying I glad to meet her, and was interested in how she became a follower of Jesus. Her reply completely stunned me:

“I am the right kind of Christian.” she said, glaring at me. I just stood there not having any idea about her meaning. No one spoke. What to do?

Suddenly Veronica, one of the film crew who spoke English, gently took my hand and led me away from the group saying “I want to show you something—look up!” The sun was behind the dark clouds, lining them with gold with streams of light shining down. It was beautiful. Veronica said “In China we call those Jesus clouds because pictures of Jesus always have them.” I laughed and relaxed.

What a wonderful gift—a loving rescue from an awkward encounter with the added grace of a visual image of Christ’s reign filling the sky around those dark clouds. It gives me hope remembering it and telling you about my little glimpse of the Kingdom of love that day.

Now, you remember a glimpse you’ve had and tell someone about it.

Honor the reign of God with your story.

