

The Last Sunday after Pentecost – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony. November 24, 2019
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

Today's gospel seems out of place on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. We are preparing for Christmas, the feast where we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Today we heard the gospel appropriate for Good Friday. Jesus crucified between two criminals, mocked and seemingly defeated. Jesus who does not on the surface seem to be the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah of God.

You will notice that the altar hangings have changed from the green of ordinary time to white. White the color of Easter.

Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent the hangings will be blue, we will have an Advent Wreath and four blue candles, one of which will be lighted, as we begin the New Year, the cycle of feasts and fasts that tells again the great story of Jesus, the Christ and what that means to us as human beings and as those who believe.

This Sunday the altar is dressed in white, it is a very special feast. This Sunday marks the end of the year, the church year. Like any end event, it is a time for looking back over the past and taking stock of what has occurred in the previous year. Like any end event, having remembered what has gone before and added up what has been good and what is remembered as less than perfect it is time to think of the year to come.

Today we stand with our feet figuratively in two places, that which has been and that which is about to be.

On that hill, the place of the Skull, there were three crosses, three out of literally hundreds that had been there before. Crucifixion was the Roman punishment for any who rebelled, who dared to challenge the power of the Empire. In the view of Rome and of the Synagogue all three were criminals. They dared to challenge the world as it was. In one way the three who hung there on that day were not unusual. Many would follow after them to the place of the Skull. But it was only that day, the crucifixion of Jesus that changed the world forever. It is what one of the criminals crucified that day recognized. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The Apostle Paul as he preached and planted churches was clear that the crucifixion was the hinge event between the old world and the new. Now, says Paul, we are all living in the end times. It is this sense that the end was coming that lent urgency to the preaching of all of the apostles and it was this sense of the end that was coming that gave them the courage to endure persecution, torture and death. They knew without a shadow of a doubt that when they died they would enter into the Kingdom of God, heaven. We have largely lost that sense of living in a new age, the time when we expect the end to be near. It happens from time to time, remember the Late Great Planet Earth? Occasionally we will hear of a group of Christians who believe they see the signs of the second coming, but most of the world scoffs. We have lost that sense of urgency that was in the early Christians.

The two criminals that were crucified with Jesus represent the choice that is open to all human beings. “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” The choice to stay in this world and hold on to its values. Or, like the second criminal, we can choose to enter into God’s kingdom. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus spent the majority of his ministry and preaching talking about the Kingdom of God. It was the major theme of his message. Over 50 parables and sayings in the four Gospels deal with the challenge of accepting God’s values and living in the kingdom, a place recognizably different from the world. When anyone tries consistently to live contrary to the values of the world, there is a cost.

The church, after the resurrection began to wonder about this kingdom, what did it mean, where was it located, how did one enter, and importantly when would it arrive. There was a theological split in thinking that has endured to this day. Was the kingdom already come, here and now in the people who believe, who call Jesus the Christ? Or was the kingdom yet to come and long awaited. There are theological words for this split. The first is realized eschatology, the second apocalyptic.

A case can be made from scripture for both views and over time, centuries of time, sometimes one view was held more strongly than the other. In some faith communities one view would be held as more compelling than the other. But both views have come down to us and continue to be a part of Christianity.

Like so many times when we try to pin God down to a concrete and firm answer, the answer is both/and. The kingdom of God is both here now and coming.

I have very little experience of earthly kingdoms, and I do not personally know any kings. I suspect that the same is true of most of you. Kingdoms and kings and the freedom from such was what our history books tell us the American Revolution was fought about. When I think of kingdoms and kings, I think of absolute rulers and of territory, land. There were certainly absolute rulers and territorial kingdoms in the Near East, and Jews had knowledge of them. Israel had a long and sad history of being defeated by kings and being incorporated into someone else’s kingdom.

Perhaps it was this sad experience that led the Hebrew language to develop a different understanding of kingdom. The Hebrew word is less about physical territory and much more about living under a particular kind of reign or rule. The Kingdom of God is more accurately seen as the rule or reign of God. The kingdom was not a place but a way of life. It was this way of life, life in the Kingdom in *this* world as well as in the world beyond death that was the core of Jesus’ theology. That core became important to the early church as they waited expectantly for the return of the Messiah. When it did not happen within a generation, the church began to see that the promised kingdom had in a real sense been made present through Jesus in his ministry. They recognized that the kingdom continued to be made present and to grow as they lived in a new and very different way.

The second criminal in those moments of insight on the cross knew the reality of the kingdom in real time and so he asked only one thing. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

And what of us, here in this place so many years later. We too wait for the kingdom coming, pray for it every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Thy kingdom come. But what does that mean? For me it means both/and. I pray the kingdom of God will be lived and experienced today and I also expect that in God's time, the full kingdom will come. When, how, what that might look like is not for me to know. The promise is real and trustworthy but not yet fully here. Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom in the future. But, we are also praying for the continuing of God's kingdom unfolding in our lives each day.

Some of you may remember the last prayer book revision. There was the green book and the zebra book. Liturgy was being developed and tested. Finally, there was a proposed book and then by action of the General Convention it became the prayer book we now have. I remember being in church on a Sunday soon after the book became the book. We had a guest preacher, I don't remember who, and I remember little of what he said. One thing I do remember after all of these years. One of the revised liturgies for the Eucharist contained these words. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. The preacher suggested that those words should be revised. He suggested that the proper words would be Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ has come again. That struck a chord with me. Christ has come again in each of us. We are called to make Christ present in our lives and in the lives of those whose path we cross. It is a choice, one we make daily, to accept the challenge of living with God's values instead of the values of the world.