

Rediscovering Christ in community

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 November 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Reign of Christ C

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23: 33-43

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

Today marks the end of the Christian year. Next Sunday is Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas. I'm really excited that Christmas falls on Sunday this year – it works out really well for preachers! This will be only the third time it's happened in my ministry. I remember being really miffed in the year 2000 when we missed out on one that should have been Christmas on Sunday because of a Leap Year! But, enough about me and back to this week.

This Sunday was traditionally called the feast of Christ the King, and more recently it has been called Reign of Christ Sunday. Last year we talked about this change in the Worship Team meeting and decided that it still didn't adequately address the theological problem: that such naming removed Jesus from his earthly life of teaching, healing and restoring people to community. Now on the throne of heaven, crowned and gilded through centuries of Christian art, he no longer resembles the Jewish peasant teacher and prophet who changed the world.

At a time in human history when so many US Christians have voted in support of a triumphalist understanding of faith, I want to resist talk of kings or kingdoms or even of reigns. I want to reject the associations of patriarchy and class that accompany such metaphors.

Last year Warren Talbot suggested an alternative naming of this day as "Community of Christ." It works for me because it marks the end of the Christian year, we are invited to think about the journey we have been on and to think about who we are as the community of Christ in this place, seeking to follow the Way that Jesus chartered, seeking to remember the Divine Presence who holds us and all creation in wisdom and in love.

To think about the community into which Laurana was baptised this morning. And to think about the world around us and our call to engage with it in Jesus' way. And God knows it's a complicated world right now. People say that, if the US catches cold, Australia sneezes. It seems like the US has elected a man with orange hair and Orange, NSW went rogue and voted for the hunters and shooters.

We don't know what's going to happen. We don't know what Donald Trump is going to do. But it will inevitably affect us too. His plans to tear up the Paris climate agreement are frightening for the future of the planet. His strategy for excluding Muslim people is terrifying for people of that faith. One member of his transition team says they're working on a register for followers of Islam, while Trump denies, despite video evidence, he ever said anything about keeping a database and surveilling Muslims.

At a time like this, we do not need Christian metaphors that claim Christological superiority. We live in a postmodern world of seekers, multiple faiths, and people who understand themselves as spiritual but not religious.

The world's religions are not the same, nor do they claim to lead to the same destination by similar practices. This diversity doesn't have to lead to a division of faiths, but to an evolving interdependence of faith positions, growing alongside one another and learning from one other. It's not a time for one king over all.

The Jewish and Christian texts that we read this morning invite us to deeper reflection on the nature of the Sacred. Jeremiah speaks of divine shepherding. Jeremiah's God does not dominate but serves. The God of all things cares for each thing: God's companionship casts away all fear and renews all things. God appoints caregivers not to "lord it over" the people but to heal and reconcile all people. Divine Presence seeks wholeness for all creation, and its spokespeople have the same responsibility, to gather together, to seek unity, and nurture new life and creativity – a we have done today.

In the Gospel reading, Luke sees Calvary as the centre of sacred space-time. Jesus forgives the people right in front of him. The crowd and the political leaders are dominated by fear and self-centredness. They cannot see beyond their own alienation and their need to dominate and destroy.

Jesus is the projection, the scapegoat, intended to ease their anxiety and alienation; but this projection does not limit or dominate him. He freely claims his relationship to God's Shalom in the maelstrom of violence.

Jesus' promise to this companion on the cross next to him moves us from clock time, from chronos time, to eternity time – and to Kairos time. To the crisis moment. He says: "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" suggesting a relationship of wholeness in the midst of dying and death.

The crucifixion gospel reading does not speak of Christ the King but of Jesus the Human One – who was executed as a criminal.

Remember that crucifixion was not an execution method for common criminals. It was reserved for enemies of the state. Crucifixion was saved for people the Roman Empire wanted to make examples of: people who had committed crimes like insurrection, civil disobedience or treason. This is why Jesus was crucified.

The message sent to the commoners by a body left to rot on a cross was simple: *'Don't oppose the state or its systems. Don't interfere with the ones who are making a profit from those systems. Or you too will end up hanging on a tree at the edge of the city.'*

Common thieves were not usually crucified, so maybe these two crucified with Jesus were ripping off the system. The one on the left joins in the mocking, which is extraordinary given his own fate. But maybe it helps to jeer when you have nothing to lose. Or maybe he really believes that Jesus might somehow save him. But instead of a reply from Jesus, he hears a voice from the other side, challenging him: *'What are you doing? What are you saying? We are all dying. And you and I are up here for the things we've done! This man has done nothing.'*

A great deal of Christian theology has been written based on this assertion of Jesus' innocence. All the nonsense about him being a perfect, innocent sacrifice.

But if you really think about it. Jesus was actually guilty, and Jesus was intentionally guilty.

He was intentional about challenging corruption in authority and about exposing systems that were oppressive.

He was intentional in the telling of his stories and parables, knowing full well they would antagonize religious and political elites.

He was intentional in healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, picking grain on the Sabbath - all in plain sight.

He was intentional in turning over the tables at the temple, infuriating the vendors, interrupting the business as usual status quo of religious profit. Destabilising the delicate balance that existed between religion and state.

He was intentional in his message to set free the oppressed, to share with the poor, to include instead of exclude, to love instead of to judge.

He was a threat to the peace of the empire, and that led him to the cross.

Jesus told his disciples, and anyone who would listen to him, "follow me." But what he is asking us to do in 'following' him, is to join him in radical acts of social justice - to participate in the new reign of God, to help usher in an era of *paradise*...

The Greek word for *paradise*, the word we misinterpret as Heaven, is *paradisio*. It refers to the Garden of Eden, a state of delight, a place where all things are just, and fair, and whole. Jesus knew what it would take to bring the world to *paradise*... it would cost him his life.

The voice from the thief on the right continues... "*Jesus, remember me today when you come into your kingdom...*" *Jesus, remember me today when you come into your kingdom...* This morning, I changed the words of the Taizé song "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom" to "*Jesus now dwell with us, as we live for love and justice*" to remind us that we are not asking to be remembered in some far off heaven, but to be accompanied on the path that leads to fullness of life.

The thief on the right realizes that Jesus has been sentenced to death for standing up against systems of political and religious corruption in the world. He sees that Jesus' way, although it led him to death, is the only way to peace...to making the world whole...to compassion and justice...

We don't know what the future of our world will look like, but we do know that Paradise doesn't include fear, or hate, or even just shutting down - which is such a temptation. We must answer the call of Jesus which hasn't changed for 2000 years - 'Follow Me *to Paradise*.'

We can experience eternal life now: we can experience God's vision amid the ordinary moments and tragic conflicts of life. Death does not limit God's love or God's creativity. Rather in life and death Divine Presence continues its impulse towards wholeness.

The idea of the community, the communion of Christ, is for healing and welcome and for inclusion. In the divine-human, divine-creaturely, call and response, Divine Presence identifies with our deepest needs and the deepest needs of the planet and does all that it can be done to bring wholeness to the body, cell by cell and soul by soul. The vision invites us to be agents of the moral arc of the universe.

But, remember that call to remember. That second thief did not ask to be saved but to be remembered. And Jesus answers with assurance and compassion, "*you will be with me in Paradise.*"

God, sacred energy, divine presence, remembers us... re - members us, draws us in to the body of life.

And we are called to re-member one another, to create communities of care where little children like Laurana and the oldest members of our congregation are welcome, where indigenous and migrant and refugee, gay and straight, rich and poor, are included and remembered.

And we are called to take the compassion that we have known from the Holy, and the compassion that we have known from one another in community and the other places in our lives where we are touched and held and welcomed.

We are called to remember the dignity of each human person,
and the well-being of creature and creation,
as we live into the shalom of God.