

Sermon, Nov. 25, 2007, Last Pentecost, Proper 29 Yr C

The Reign of Christ

Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Canticle 16, The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79)

Collosians 1:11-20

Luke 23:35-43

On this last Sunday of Pentecost, we observe the “The Reign of Christ.” We have reached the end of another liturgical year, the *near* end of the Gospel of Luke, and from the gospel today we hear what sounds like the *end of Jesus*, but we know how the story goes. “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again” (The proclamation of the mystery of faith, BCP). With Advent 2007 coming into view though, we hear this gospel reading today which is more suggestive of the departure of Jesus, than his arrival. It’s a beautiful and poignant story, and it’s not the end.

With the people milling about and watching and the religious leaders making fun of him, boasting about finally having their way with Jesus, he carries on offering God’s saving grace right there from his cross on Calvary, right up to the very end of his earthly life. A criminal paying his *debt to society* for what must have been a lifetime of crime, or one really dreadful act, recognizes Jesus, asks to be saved, and Jesus assures him he will be with him in paradise (23:43). Of all the God-like and unconditional acts of grace that Jesus offered his people, I feel this is one of the most convincing that he was truly more than just another human being; he *was* God come to earth; only God is able to forgive and love in such a way, reconciling all...each and every one of us.

Paul described Jesus to the Colossian Christians as “*the visible image of the invisible God....and God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ. And through Christ God reconciled everything to himself* (Col. 1: 15, 19-20). Paul’s depiction of Jesus describes the divine nature of Christ and verse 20 is a fair description of what happened on that Friday afternoon when Jesus promised the criminal hanging next to him that he would join him in paradise that very day: through Jesus, God reconciled and accepted even the criminal to himself. Very near death, a man who had lived a desperate life, turned to the incarnation of God and his prayer was answered. Our faith saves us, in spite of our deeds.

The Song of Zechariah, read to us this morning, (Luke 1: 68-79, Canticle 16, p. 92 BCP), is placed in direct contrast with the story from Luke’s account of the last few moments of Jesus’ earthly life. Zechariah’s is a wonderful story.

Zechariah was a Jewish priest. He was told before anyone else that God was setting in motion an “up close and personal” visit to earth. (*The angel visited Mary and told her that her son Jesus would be great. Zechariah’s visitor told him his son would “prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.”*) Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were known for their personal piety. They grew old together sharing the common pain of not having children. Because of this, they were considered to be *outside* of God’s favor among their friends and relatives. They were left to themselves most of their days, but their God was close at hand.

One day while on duty in the Temple in Jerusalem, Zechariah received an unexpected blessing. He was chosen to be the priest who would enter the Holy Place to offer incense and other pleasing gifts to God for the people. Much to his surprise, he found himself face to face with an angel, in his holy place. The angel gave him the news of the coming Savior and that he and Elizabeth would themselves become parents, and he should name the boy *John*. But the news of the coming Savior was shadowed by doubts about his ability to father the child the angel promised him and Elizabeth. As a result, God prevented Zechariah from speaking until the promise became a reality. It was if God were to say, “*right now*” to Zachariah and the truth would be told.

Zechariah’s discourse is actually more prophecy than a song, but for certain it is news to rejoice. These were the first words Zechariah had spoken after months of silence. I suppose the sudden return of his speech was enough to be grateful for, but when he spoke, well, he really had something to say!

In his prophecy, Zechariah recalled hundreds of years of God’s gracious acts among God’s people: “*The God of Israel came to his people and set them free; God has raised a savior, born of the house of David; through the prophets God promised that we would be saved from the hands who would do us harm; God promised to show mercy, remembering the holy covenant, that we could worship without fear and remain holy in God’s sight all the days of our lives.*” Then, Zechariah tenderly personalized his prophecy. His and Elizabeth’s promised son is chosen for the most important role in the history of the ages; to prepare the way for Jesus.

When their child was born, Zechariah yet unable to speak, wrote on a writing tablet for all to see “His name is John.” The promise was real. Then, right then, filled with the Holy Spirit Zechariah began to speak. Turning to John he said, “*You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give the people knowledge of their rescue and deliverance, forgiving their failures. A new dawn will break upon us shining on those who are lost in the darkness...you will prepare the way for the One who will guide us into the way of peace.*” With that said, John the Baptist’s fate was confirmed, he grew up strong in spirit, and lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel (Luke 1:80). Around the age of 30, Jesus sought out John, that he be baptized, by him, and Zechariah’s prophecy was fulfilled, John pronounced Jesus “the Chosen One”, the “Lamb of God,” the One for whom he had prepared the way.

Ordinary Time, Pentecost, year C, has come to its end. Next Sunday is Advent 1, liturgical year A begins, and we hear another entire year of different takes on the story, which will yet again be fairly summarized by Zechariah’s Song: *Benedictus Dominus Deus*, Blessed be the Lord, he has come to his people...

.....the visible image of the invisible God, came so he could live in us all. Prepare the way, our watch and wait for him begins again, right now, and the truth will be told.