

**Sunday, November 20**  
**Last Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Luke 23:33-43**  
**The Rev. Fanny Belanger**

Today is the last Sunday of our liturgical year.  
Next Sunday, we will be in Advent, and we will start reading Matthew  
(instead of Luke).

It will be the first year of our three years reading cycle:  
Year 1 is Matthew, Year 2 Mark, Year 3 Luke  
and in between John, spread over the three years cycle.

Today is also the feast of Christ the King.  
At the end of the liturgical year, after we've been through the whole cycle of readings,  
it all comes down to that:

Christ is the King – the center of Christian life  
*The head of the church and  
the author of our salvation*

as we remember in our Eucharistic prayer.

Interestingly, Christ the King is a pretty recent festival (at the scale of Church History)  
Pope Pius XI made this day a feast  
in 1925.

1925, the very year Mussolini dissolved the Parliament and became dictator of Italy.

It was no coincidence.

Pius XI said that *When nations are spinning out of control,  
it is even more important for Christians to remember that there is a King above all other kings,  
who calls us to lives of faith*

*and hope  
and peace  
and righteousness.*

As so the Church started worshiping Christ the King, at a very dark time for Italian people.  
They trusted Mussolini, you see.  
He led a strong campaign claiming  
He wanted to save the country from the post world war chaos.  
He said he was on people's side, and did not care for the politics of politicians.  
Sadly it turned out, he fought only for himself, and did not care about democracy.

Maybe sometimes we question democracy, it does not always work the way  
we expect it to.

But well, if democracy is not more than the lesser evil,  
We know that it's so far the best thing we have.

And as with all precious things,  
it's easily shattered

We have to be careful when we handle it.  
When we trust it too much, but also

When we contest it.

We don't want to lose it but at the end of the day, we know that good and evil can come out of it.

As so today the Church asks us to remember that the ultimate kingship is not from this world  
but from Christ our Lord, Christ the king.

So what kind of Lord  
is Christ our Lord? What kind of king?  
*God is in control*, we generally say  
He sees it all, decides it all, judges it all.

And that's why you may have heard some Christians say:  
*No matter what's going on in the world,*  
*God is watching it*  
*God is watching out*  
*and we'll be fine (as long as we are in God's good graces)?*  
And so as Christians we can be tempted to forgo the powers of this world as if they had no incidence,  
no consistency  
when confronted to our faith.  
If we trust God we'll be fine, won't we?  
Turns out the Gospel we have today tells us another story.

I don't know if you have noticed the  
irony.  
At the feast of Christ the King  
we don't worship the triumphant Christ on his throne in heaven,  
with angels and singing.

But we look at the dying Jesus on the cross.  
This Jesus that strangely we almost never see  
hanging in our churches:  
Christ suffering, pierced and torn, agonizing.

But today the Gospel shows this Jesus to us, and it looks like on this place called The Skull,  
God is not very much in control of anything.  
Turns out  
Jesus is not really doing fine  
Turns out  
It's pretty much a nightmare to name it.

Not only there is the suffering and the bleeding and the agony of a death condemnation  
But also a deafening rumble of hatred  
Mockeries  
Insults  
Spatting and swearing  
The Romans and the crowd, all against Jesus.

Turns out  
the devil finds it very laughable that God is in charge, and that  
Jesus is the King.  
The Romans made for Jesus a crown of thrones, they made him a scepter with a reed  
And at the top of the cross, they put a sign  
That reads in three languages so everybody will get the joke:  
This is the king of the Jews

Yes, they are having a good laugh at the whole comedy.

So what are you gonna do now  
God? Says the devil.  
And that's probably what was wondering Jesus, too:  
*My God why have you forsaken me?*  
How do you save yourself,  
When the hands that healed are nailed on the wood.  
How do we find God in dark places?  
How do we find God when salvation seems  
impossible?  
Three times the crowd asked Jesus to save himself,

No salvation was coming.

But here, that's when we find out about Luke's very personal theology.  
In all the three other Gospels, Matthew, Mark and John  
It says that the two robbers crucified with Jesus are against him,  
with the crowd  
insulting him.  
But Luke – Luke chooses to tell the story of a repentant thief  
whom  
when hearing Jesus's compassion for his torturers:  
*God forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*

Has compassion on Jesus

This thief has compassion on Jesus.  
Stands for him – *Leave him alone*  
Rebukes the accusers – *He has done nothing wrong*  
Turns to Jesus – *Jesus, remember me*

Maybe the thief has this extraordinary revelation and sudden conversion to the Son of God -  
We don't know. Or maybe he just thought:  
“Perhaps this so called Prophet is just a dreamer, but I prefer his meekness and kindness to  
the horror and the hate”  
*Remember me in your kingdom,  
whatever this kingdom is.*

Although they are a bit different, the Gospels of John, Mark and Matthew agree  
on a theology of the cross, it means: they seem to say Jesus wished to die to save mankind  
for their sins.  
*He had pay the price.*

But Luke sees things a little bit differently.  
Luke insists that ultimately it is not the cross *per se* that saves.  
It is God's mercy.

And so what it means is that in the midst of our nightmares,  
God is not in control, agreeing with it all, supervising it all.  
Yet, if we open the door God can redeem it all.

Luke shows us how salvation comes to us.

God redeems it all because of his love, that is compassion God's ability  
to feel what we feel and to be with us wherever we are.  
United in this love to one another, united to God  
we are made eternal in the perfect friendship of the King.  
We are saved because  
God  
takes all the pain the hate and the suffering on God's shoulders – on the cross, literally.

There are no justifications for the evil in our world.  
God is not in control of this world in the sense that God is making sure that  
in spite of all  
everything goes the way God wants, because God has a perfect plan we cannot yet see.  
(As Pope Pius XI observed, on earth actually everything can spin out of control  
pretty quickly.)  
Every Sunday, don't we pray *Your will be done*  
*on earth as it is in heaven* – because we know that what happens on earth is not God's will?  
The cross, suffering and nightmares are not necessary, as a *part of a bigger picture*.  
They are abhorred by God, very likely.

Yet, Love does not avoid suffering.

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In Jesus, God comes to be with us in our darkest places  
and this is how God redeems us all, embracing us in our suffering, God makes sense of everything.

*Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

If we open to God's compassion as did the thief, it opens the door of heaven in the midst of the worst  
hell you can imagine.

And therefore, as the thief who looking at Jesus felt moved to compassion,  
we are called to compassion.

And compassion isn't just about feeling for the victims,  
*But about standing in front of the bullies,*  
*defending those who are unjustly accused.*

You may know that the people who were crucified by the Roman Empire  
Weren't your regular criminals, but the enemies of the State.

The ones who fought for liberty

Who fought whatever it took – stealing, killing.

But it looks like our thief, at the end of his life

Finds a better way to fight.

Tender compassion and firm resistance, instead of burning anger and empty rebellion.

Mussolini once said *I'd rather live one day as a lion than one hundred*  
*as a sheep.*

To which Jesus responds: *Today, I'd rather die like a lamb.*

I'd rather die like a lamb – Not in being weak and submissive  
but leading and ending a life with no hate,

Offering himself so he might be with us.

Offering our compassion to all, that's the best way to stand for the kingdom we believe in. Amen.