

November 25, 2007

Scripture readings: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

Sermon title: "Investing in Heaven"

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What an odd Gospel lesson to hear today! Just as we are gearing up for the Christmas shopping season, we are taken to the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus! That seems out of step with our holiday season. We gave reverent thanks last Thursday with our families and friends. Then last Friday, just two days ago, it is as if a great dam burst over our malls and markets. Crowds of shoppers lined up at the doors of stores at five in the morning to catch outrageous sales of merchandise. Some even burst through the opening doors at 4 a.m., and when I watched news stories of this on TV, I could imagine the William Tell Overture (also known as the Lone Ranger Theme Song) blaring away as the thundering waves of shoppers galloped through the aisles and wrestled with other shoppers for the limited sale items on the shelves! The Friday after Thanksgiving is so notable for its surge of Christmas shoppers, that it has acquired its own name: Black Friday! Retailers must have high expectations of pulling their accounts for the entire year into the black over this very weekend. Everywhere you look in the stores there is a background of Christmas trees and red ribbons and strings of little colored lights and pretend snow and Santas of every stripe imaginable.

So it would seem that as we gather for worship today, we would hear something to point us toward the joy and excitement of the season, something that has to do with the birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, and of gift-giving. Instead, we are taken from the excitement of the Black Friday of retailers to the Good Friday of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Christians are people that march to the beat of a different drummer in this world, and our Scripture today stands in stark contrast to the frenzied shopping malls around us. As many of you know, the Scriptures that we choose to use in our education classes and our worship services here at St. James are usually based on the Revised Common Lectionary, which is a schedule of Scripture readings to be used over a three-year cycle. It is intended to point us to the breadth of the entire Bible in that three-year time, and it is used by most of the Mainline Protestant churches as well as having many points of convergence with the Roman Catholic Church. The lectionary also chooses Scriptures that will match with the liturgical year, Scriptures that will teach us about our faith with their timing as well as with their content.

So it is pretty obvious that the Church is running on a different calendar than the world around us right now. Today is Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. This is the last Sunday of the Church year, and then next Sunday will be the first Sunday of the next Church year. It will be the First Sunday of Advent, and it is appropriate that the Church year begins in anticipation of the coming of Jesus. It is even more fitting that the Church year ends recognizing the true sovereignty of Jesus Christ, and affirming that the way of Jesus is the rule of truth, justice and righteousness that soars far above any other earthly power or national allegiance.

The reign of Christ is established in a very startling way. Jesus is not set upon a throne, but upon a cross to die the torturous death of a criminal. This is not what we expect strong leaders to endure. If you have seen the 1970's Rock Opera, 'Jesus Christ Superstar,' you will remember how excited Simon the Zealot becomes when Jesus approaches Jerusalem. Simon is sure that he and the disciples are on the cusp of something enormous and earthshaking. Simon is sure that Jesus is going to start a revolution, kick out the Romans and the privateering priests, and become the king of the land. "You'll get the power and the glory," he sings, "Forever and ever and ever!" Simon sings this with much dancing and with backup singers, as if he is giving an introduction to a superstar. Jesus, however, responds very quietly and sadly that neither Simon nor anyone else knows what true power and glory are. And then Jesus proceeds on the way of the cross. It is this way of the cross that reveals the paltry substance of all the earthly powers. It is this way of the cross that reveals that the power of the suffering love of God is far stronger than the power of Caesar or of presidents or of dictators or of anyone else on earth.

So in order to see the greatness and power of Jesus Christ, we must see his suffering on a cross. In Luke's account of the crucifixion, we see everyone that surrounds the cross humiliating Jesus. A common theme is, "If you are so great, if you are so powerful, then save yourself right now!" The response of Jesus to this is not anything we would expect. It is not along the lines of, "Okay, just wait and see how I rock the earth in three days. I'll show you then!" It is not, "Fine, I hope you all get to suffer like this someday! You're just a bunch of losers!"

No. Instead, Jesus prays for them, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

One of the criminals being crucified with him takes up the taunt of the crowd, and says, "Come on, if you're the Messiah, use your superpowers and get us out of here!" It is yet another temptation for Jesus. The devil had challenged Jesus early in his ministry, and offered him a way to use his talents in a different and less painful way. Now the temptation is for Jesus to save himself, to avoid the cross, and also save the criminals alongside. He is tempted to become another kind of Messiah, a different kind of king than he has been called to become. He has before him the temptation to become the type of rebel leader that he has been falsely accused of being.

But he is steadfast in his purpose. He is a Messiah who saves others by NOT saving himself. He is a savior who saves by giving himself on behalf of others. He is not a leader of self-preservation or of self-advancement. He is a leader who shows us a power we would otherwise rush past and ignore, because it doesn't look like anything we would call "power." Even so, it is the way of Jesus that demonstrates the authority that ultimately rescues criminals, even scoffers, even condemning leaders. As Jesus refuses to follow this temptation to save his own neck, he defines for us what sort of King he really is.

This means that this highest point of Christian faith, the crucifixion, is not a power play that follows the rules and logic of most of the power plays we see among earthly powers. It is not a power that relies upon retaliation, competition, self-protectiveness, and such things. It is a power that refuses to be bought, that refuses to “go along just to get along,” that refuses to scuttle off and hide in the shadows from illegitimate powers. It is a power that dares to trust in God, a power that is steadfast in obedience to the call of God even if that takes him to a cross and then beyond. It is a power that dares to stand up to evil systems and governments.

What an irony that the religious leaders lead the cry for the death of Jesus, while it is a criminal that perceives the true identity and nature of Jesus. The second criminal has picked up upon the prayer of Jesus to forgive those around him who relish the sight of his suffering. This criminal hears the words of a true leader, a true king, whose authority is like no other, who prays for those who spitefully abuse and persecute him. This criminal asks for a place for himself in Christ’s realm, in the kingdom where the keynote is forgiveness and not recompense, where a condemned criminal can become fully restored and get a new beginning, where the leader is continually watching out for the well-being of the followers and not self, even when they cause him heartache and suffering.

This is not an easy calling, to lead others by serving them and watching out for their well-being. It is not easy to find a way to be strong against evil, and yet love the evildoers. Walter Wink offers the example of those who offered resistance to the power of apartheid in South Africa as an avenue to finding ways to love one’s enemies. He writes:

*...in South Africa, many blacks are fully aware that they are fighting the apartheid system, not merely white people. They know that they cannot gain freedom simply by changing the color of the people at the top and leaving the system intact. When police are at the door, people inside will warn, ‘The System is here.’ When they see propaganda on television, they quip, ‘The System is lying again.’ Of a strike: ‘We’re struggling against the System.’ According to Albert Nolan, the most effective way to get a black to stop behaving in collusion with the government is to say, ‘You are supporting the System.’ (Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination, Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 51-52.)*

There is much more going on in this season than elbowing your way to a checkout counter to the tune of “Jingle Bells.” This is a time to recognize that true holiness has come near, that a truly regal presence is a truly serving presence. You are called to be a citizen of this nation of the suffering and crucified one. It is a call to bring change to our world’s tired ways of greed and opportunism. It is a call to stand alongside those who suffer, to offer forgiveness where forgiveness is least expected, to give the hope of paradise to those who only see destruction around them. Let us take up the way of the cross, and let us faithfully enter into the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Amen.