

*Sermon for Proper 29, Year C
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“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” So God says through Jeremiah, his prophet. It is a remarkable statement, in context. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, God says that he is delivering his faithless people into the hands of their enemies, so that faithfulness to God requires that one submit to judgment and bondage under Babylon. If you remember, that’s why Jeremiah is always in trouble. He is seen as unpatriotic, because he keeps telling people to stop resisting the pagan conquerors.

God’s people have become so corrupt, immoral, and shameless, that he raises up the pagans in order to chastise them. False prophets are running amok, telling the people they have nothing to fear, that God will deliver them as he has in the past. The Priests adulterate the worship of the Lord with pagan rites and immorality. The political leaders lap up the pabulum of these sycophants to feed their own egos, even as God’s judgment marches up from Babylon to overtake them. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” says the Lord. And they persecute the true prophet, Jeremiah, because he gives them God’s word straight, with no chaser. Isn’t it amazing how the human condition doesn’t change?

And yet, in the midst of all this, God says that this same family of rulers, the line of David, will produce a righteous king, just and wise, who will reign over his people, providing safety and security.

Now jump forward about 600 years or so. The righteous branch of David is hanging on a cross outside Jerusalem. He is being executed in the manner of a slave. He is bleeding where the nails have traumatized his hands and feet, where he has been flogged, where the thorns have pierced his head. And he struggles periodically to get his breath by pulling against the nails to relieve the pressure on his lungs.

This is not our normal picture of a king. Indeed, this is no normal king. A good king does justice to the best of his ability. But the perfect king must do justice perfectly. And so this perfect king, this king of kings, our king, finds himself not appearing as a king at all.

The difficulty is not that he is less than a king, but that he is more than a king. For Jesus to merely claim the Davidic kingship would actually be extreme humility. You may remember that he never actually does so. He fulfils the prophecies. He enters Jerusalem on the donkey. He never denies that he is the

king. But his actual claims for himself are of a much higher order. Like, “Before Abraham was I am.”

In Colossians, St. Paul tells us that he is not merely *a* son of God, as King David was, but “he is the image of the invisible God, the first-born”. As St. Paul would have it, the person hanging there bleeding on Good Friday was the source of all things and the agent of creation. And not just of earthly things. “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.” And then he goes on to name spiritual, angelic beings of various orders: thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities. The point is the same as St. John’s: “Without him was not *anything* made.” He was before all created things.

Now this is all very well, and we’ve heard it before. The Word of God was the agent of creation. But St. Paul is saying more than that here. It’s difficult even to get our minds around this. He uses three different prepositions: All things were created *in* him, *through* or *by* him, and our translation has “for him” but St. Paul says literally *into* him. So Jesus is not merely the agent of our creation. He is the source, not only of what makes us up, but also of the form it takes. He is so intimate with his creation that it is almost as if we swim in him. And he is our destination or destiny. All of creation is on a trajectory from our creation to our reunion with Christ, in which we never are bereft of his enveloping presence. It seems the pantheists are on to something. It is “in him” that all things consist, hold together, have their being.

And yet the pantheists are wrong, too. That same person in whom all things consist already existed before all things. His particularity is never overridden by his creation. All things may hold together in him, but he himself may also be laughing over dinner with his friends, or hanging there bleeding and suffering on the cross.

This is not our normal picture of a king. Trying to conceptualize such a person leaves the mind spinning. He is just too big. And then there is more. He acts. “For in him was pleased to dwell this entire fullness, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, ... making peace by the blood of his cross.”

This perfect king, who is much more than a mere king, provides perfect justice. Not the kind of provisional justice of which we normally think. Perfect justice. And we are the ones on trial. We don’t normally think we are, but it is so. At best we think of ourselves as the crowd of people who stood by, watching. At worst, we think we have the ability and the prerogative to critique the king. “Come on! If you are the king, do something productive.” But what we really are is the crucified thieves.

In order to provide perfect justice, the king must deal with my crimes and yours, not just the sin of those other people who we think deserve to be dealt with. And that is why we find him looking so distinctly un-royal. In order to give us

perfect justice and perfect peace, he has taken our punishment on himself. That is the crowning perfection of his true royalty. And, again, it is just too big to get our minds around, really.

How do we respond to this perfect king who takes on our slavery in order to bring us justice and peace together? This more-than-king who becomes like us so that we can become like him? The two thieves give us two models to follow. Like the first thief, we can commit the blasphemy of expecting Jesus to immediately remove our present pain. This is tempting, because we are such small creatures. And the anguish is real. We cannot usually see beyond our present agonies. And we certainly cannot comprehend the magnitude of Jesus, in his being or in his actions. It is easier to say, "What have you done for me lately, your majesty?"

But when you're done with your latest snit, you may want to return to the path of the second thief. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He sees the broken body of the king and recognizes in it his own brokenness. The one in whom all things hold together hangs there providing a way out of this mess that I have created. I am receiving the due reward of my deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong. By his constant working, the Lord and Master of all things holds me in existence, in spite of myself, until the time when I find myself fully *in* him.

If we are willing to enter into this penitence expressed by the second thief, then the promise of Paradise is for us. And the pleasure of true life-in, through, and with the King of kings and Lord of lords-will never fail.