

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 20, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 23:33-43
“INRI”

There is a story that I first heard I don't know how many years ago – it had certainly been around for a while, and I may well have used it in a sermon before. It's one of those apocryphal, urban legend-type, or maybe church legend-type stories. It tells of a visitor being shown around a church in a particularly poor, inner-city community – I seem to remember that when I first heard the story, it was set in the Bronx in New York City in the 1960s.

The church was surrounded by all the signs of urban deprivation and poverty: boarded up homes, burned out properties, broken roads, litter, graffiti, mess, decay. The visitor entered the church and was astonished to find it richly, even opulently decorated, with rich carpeting over expensive marble floors, polished brass, gleaming silver, beautiful stained glass.

The visitor turned to the person who was proudly showing him around, and said, "This is so out of place! It can't be right! How can you possibly justify having a church like this when there is such poverty and need right outside your doors? How can you live with yourselves?"

The guide turned to the visitor and said quite calmly, "We do a lot for our community. We offer programs and services to help people and feed people and clothe people and give people somewhere safe to sleep at night. But when you come in here, you come into God's house, not ours. We are people of faith, and we want to honour God. One important way we do that is by making our church worthy of being called God's house."

How do we honour God? Today is the last Sunday in the church year, the last day in the liturgical calendar. Since the early years of the 20th century, this day has been marked as the Sunday of Christ the King, or the Sunday of the Reign of Christ. It is the one of the two Sundays in the church calendar when we celebrate Christ's triumph. The other of course, is Easter Day.

On Easter Day, we celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death and the power of the Evil One. On the Sunday of Christ the King, we celebrate the final triumph of Christ, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, who rules over all creation from his place at the right hand of God, and who will come in God's good time to establish God eternal kingdom once and for all.

So it is right that we should honour him by singing the great "big" hymns that we are singing today: Immortal, invisible, God only wise; All glory, laud and honour; To God be the glory. And it is right that the choir should sing Stanford's magnificent Te Deum Laudamus. And it is right that we should read those words from St Paul's letter to the Colossians. In theological language, these words express a high, soaring Christology – what we believe about Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the body, the church, the beginning,

the firstborn from the dead; he will have first place in everything; in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell; through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Soaring, triumphant words, words to lift the heart and encourage the soul. Words that stir even straight-laced Presbyterians to leap up and say "Amen!" – well, almost.

But words that take us back to the heart of our faith. Yes, Jesus is all these things, and deserves honour and glory and praise because he is all these things. But these words remind us that all these things came about *through the blood of his cross* Colossians 1:20.

In my continuing quest to be slightly obscure with my sermon titles, I went for INRI for today. Do you recognise it? The Synoptic Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all say that the charge against Jesus that was nailed to the cross said that he was the king of the Jews. The inscription that St John says, in his account of Calvary and the crucifixion, that Pontius Pilate was slightly different. John says that it read, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. In Latin, that is translated Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum. And for some reason, when medieval artists were depicting the crucifixion, they used the shortened version INRI.

Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. The recognition of Christ as King, first of the Jews and subsequently of the world, came about first through his death on the cross – hence Paul's words *through the blood of his cross* in Colossians – and then through his resurrection.

So while it is right and appropriate that we should sing the great "big" hymns that we are singing today, and that the choir should sing the Te Deum, and that we should read Paul's words to the Colossians, it is also right that we should ponder the account of the interaction that Jesus had with the penitent thief on the cross.

It is interesting to compare and contrast the way the two thieves reacted to Jesus. One mocked and derided Jesus. The other asked Jesus to *remember me when you come into your kingdom* Luke 23:39,42. Several times in Luke's Gospel we read of pairs of contrasting reactions to various situations. Luke seems to say that there is always a choice for all human beings.

He demonstrates this in the stories of the Pharisee and the tax-collector at prayer; the two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their different way of behaving when Jesus was in their home; the prodigal and his brother, and the different ways they handled their relationship with their father; the rich man and Lazarus, and the consequences of their different actions; and finally the two thieves in today's reading. All reacted in different ways to their particular situations. According to Luke, all had choices to make.

Just as the church in my opening story had choices. Of course, it has to be said that the choice that church made was not an either/or choice, but a both/and choice: not either to honour God with their building or to serve their community, but to do both together.

And we today have choices – choices about leadership and our concept of kingship. In his commentary on today's Gospel text in *Christian Century*, Scott D Anderson writes this.

In a presidential election year, Reign of Christ Sunday presents a striking contrast. The hubris of U.S. presidents, and of the candidates who aspire to the office, finds no place in the Passion (text) that ... (serves) as the centerpiece on this last Sunday of the church year. At Golgotha, Jesus offers a radically different vision of leadership than what we all too often see in the public realm.

... The only power (Jesus) exercises in Luke's crucifixion account—forgiving sin and inviting the criminals beside him to embrace the hope of life in God's reign—fully identifies him with the weak, rejected, and humiliated of the world. On the cross, he himself embodies that same weakness, rejection, and humiliation. Power at Golgotha is turned on its ear, finding expression in a confounding act of public vulnerability ...

As we mark the Sunday of Christ the King, the King whom we honour is the King who reigns supreme over life and death and heaven and earth and all creation. But that same King whom we honour today reigns because, in the words of that other high Christology in *Philippians 2:6-11*:

⁶ *though he was in the form of God,
(he) did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*