

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Reign of Christ, Nov 20, 2016
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ. It is the last Sunday in the Christian year and it gives us the opportunity to reflect on the end, specifically the end of time when Christ returns to bring all of God's promises to fulfillment. It is a Sunday for hope that the troubles and trials of our lives and in our world will one day be healed and whatever brokenness we experience will be restored to wholeness. There tends to be a focus on the grand and the eschatological, making it easy to get lost in the abstract, in an imagined glorious future and ignore, deny or disconnect from the on-the-ground realities we live with everyday. But such a disconnected and abstract spirituality is neither helpful nor healthy. If what we want is more God in our lives, in our community and in our wider world, then we can't disconnect our souls from our bodies or our physical lives from our spiritual ones. If we want more God - more peace, more joy, more love - here and now... then we need to be present to this moment in this place.

Our New Testament scriptures today do a good job of holding together the abstract with the concrete; future glory with today's reality; earth with heaven. First we hear a description of Christ in glory from the letter to the Colossians. Beginning particularly at verse 15, we hear a hymn of praise that describes Christ as "the image of the invisible God..." and "the head of the body, the church..." "In [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven..." It is a grand view from 10,000 feet as it were. It brings together all time, from the beginning of creation to the end; and all matter, things visible and invisible. It is beautifully clean and abstract. It is a description of Christ unsoiled by the dirt and grit of life. Until, that is, the last phrase, when we hear how God reconciles "all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." At the conclusion of a hymn about eternal glory, we are suddenly brought back to earth and to our bodily, physical lives.

The hymn's ending leads well into our Gospel passage today and its scene of Jesus' crucifixion as told in the Gospel of Luke. From the grand and eternal view of Christ's glory, we are reminded of the betrayal, the pain, and the suffering that is a constituent part of the story. Christ's glory and Christ's suffering and death are inextricably linked. Our faith is incomplete when we forget, ignore or deny the way that takes us from life to glory, for the way of Christ is the way of the cross. The question at the heart of our faith is: What does it all mean? Did Jesus have to die, and if so, why? How we answer these questions forms the core of our belief about God. If Christ "is the image of the invisible God," then how we understand the story of Christ and his crucifixion says everything about how we understand God: the supreme Ruler of the Universe; the Almighty; the Creator of All.

Much ink has been spilled trying to understand how it is that we have redemption through Christ's work on the cross. From roughly the mid-20th century on, many Christians have struggled with the explanation that Jesus had to suffer and die as payment, as a sacrifice, for our

sins. In this explanation, God requires perfection and yet has created us with free will, making it impossible for us to ever reach the perfect standard. The system God created is stacked against us such that all we can do is feel bad for our failures and feel even worse that Jesus must be betrayed, beaten, tortured and killed in our place. I don't know about you, but this doesn't sound like grace to me. It sounds mean... and transactional... like God keeps some giant tally of just how much we get it wrong, and the worse we are, the more Jesus has to suffer. More, a relationship where one party creates a problem and then makes themselves the only one who can solve it, is fundamentally abusive. When one party in a relationship can never get it right and violence is the only way to solve or deal with the problem, then abuse is taking place.

Until fairly recently, this basic understanding of the cross... this basic explanation of the core story of our faith... has been, more or less, the only one on tap. And for at least 50 years, many folks have stopped believing it. Many people have simply walked away from the church and from Christianity. From a broad cultural perspective, a majority of people in the Baby Boomer generation have left and most in younger generations have never bought in at all. Others, like so many of us here, have stayed and found a way to live with the cognitive dissonance between beliefs we no longer believe and the experience of love and grace in the community of the church. In my own life, it was about 15 years ago when I finally admitted to myself, and then to a trusted friend, that "I don't believe Christianity the way it was taught to me... but I think there's something to this Jesus stuff..." And I set out on a journey that took me to theology school and then... well... here I am.

The problem with the sacrificial understanding of the cross is that it makes Christ's death the end of the story. If payment in blood for our sins, the sins of the world, is the point, then Jesus' subsequent resurrection and ascension is an afterthought. It's a nice afterthought, a glorious one even, but it's secondary to the suffering and death. Worse, if we believe in a God who uses such violence as the means to solve the problem of sin, then as followers of this God, we are not only free to do likewise, but we may be required to do likewise. In his latest book, Brian McLaren calls this the image of a "violent God of domination," and he details some of the horrors that have been perpetrated by Christians in our history in the name of this God.

McLaren goes on to argue for a different image of God - one he calls a "nonviolent God of liberation." I think it's about a God who is strong and loving and gracious enough to forgive just because it is God's character. I believe in a God who sees our wrong-doing and judges us forgiven, just because God created us, God loves us and after the flood, God promised never to use wholesale destruction as a means of trying to solve the sin-problem ever again. I believe in a God who is strong enough to be vulnerable, even unto death, and powerful enough to choose to be killed rather than to kill. As Jesus is being arrested earlier in the Passion story in Luke, the crowd asked Jesus: "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" and when one acts, cutting off an ear of an opponent, Jesus cries: "No more of this!" and heals the injured man (22:49-51). I believe in a God whose ultimate power is in so-called weakness and foolishness that refuses to dominate, oppress, subordinate, exploit, scapegoat or marginalize. This God indeed yearns for a different world, a world where all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, class or any other human characteristic... where ALL people have access to abundance of life. For the record, that includes all of us here, from the youngest to the oldest, it just doesn't only include us. It includes far more than us. We're just the lucky ones who already know God's great love.

Did Jesus have to die? I say no. Jesus didn't have to die because of some required retribution, but Jesus did die because the rulers of the world did not, would not, live up to his example. In the Gospel scene we hear today, the leaders mock Jesus, saying: "He saved others; let him save himself..." That's really the point. Jesus saved others but he did not save himself. Even those closest to him failed to follow Jesus' example of saving others, even at risk of their own lives. And we can all understand why. If Jesus' first disciples hadn't betrayed and abandoned him, they would have suffered the same fate. It is as true today as it was back then. And yet the call remains for us to follow Jesus who we call the Christ, to save others... to work for truth and justice and peace, particularly for those who cannot do it for themselves. We are called to a ministry of resisting violence, oppression and exploitation in the world, even when it is not in our own interest to do so. We are called to reconcile and to heal, through the strength and power of Christ that dwells within us.

Just over a week ago, Canadian icon Leonard Cohen died, leaving us a treasure trove of musical prayers that defy easy explanation. One of my favourites is a song called "Come Healing," that begins: "Oh gather up the brokenness, and bring it to me now; the fragrance of those promises you never dared to vow; the splinters that you carry, the cross you left behind; come healing of the body, come of the mind..." It goes on to mingle the earthly and the heavenly in a penitential hymn pleading for healing that comes not from divine intervention but from "the heart beneath.. teaching to the broken heart above..." Let the heavens falter, and let the earth proclaim healing. This is the source of my hope... that as a church, as Christian people, we will ever more fully and passionately embrace the Good News that it is not through violence but vulnerability that salvation comes... that true strength lies in giving up privilege and that we have real power through our faith in Christ, to save others by bringing healing.