

# Pentecost 27 Year C

## Christ the King

Readings:                    Luke 1: 68 – 79  
  
                                      Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6  
  
                                      Colossians 1: 11 – 20  
  
                                      Luke 23: 33 – 43

Last week I spoke about strategic planning and the importance of having a vision or goal, and knowing how to achieve it. Another integral part of strategic planning involves leadership. The goal, plan, and success or failure of an organisation is in many ways,

though not always, tied very closely to the leadership. So, how people operate in a leadership role is crucial to the life and purpose of any community.

When we read Jeremiah chapter 23, we see something of the kind of leadership that ancient Israel experienced. Jeremiah does not provide a definition of leadership, he does, however, provide terms to describe what is understood as failed leadership. The failed leaders are ones who have destroyed the community they were to lead.

Rather than gathering the people for a common enterprise that leads to thriving, they have scattered and driven away those who depended on their leadership. They have not “tended” to the people within their responsibility.

In the context of Jeremiah’s time, the leaders have, it appears, sold out to the powerful vested interests -- priests and prophets to the interests of royalty and the wealthy, royalty to the perpetuation of its own power and wellbeing. As many of us know from painful experience, in every age and in every tradition political and religious leaders have often

created difficulties for those for whom they had responsibility. This passage makes abundantly clear that ancient Israel was no exception.

Generally, the term "shepherd" referred only to the kings of Israel. Here, it is more likely that the reference includes all ruling officials or those in authority; the priesthood as well as the king and his court. Instead of watching, protecting and caring for the flock, the leadership failed to do those things.

The worst example of this in Jeremiah's time was King Jehoiakim who condoned the

perpetration of injustice and economic oppression (Jer. 22:13-17). As a consequence the people of God were driven away and scattered; a scene reflecting the Babylonian exile. The failure of the leaders, and particularly of the king, resulted in the death of a nation.

It was into this context of the life of God's people that an appeal to a greater authority was considered. Suffering from the corruption and abuse of the leadership of Israel and Judah and their lack of concern and compassion for their own people, Jeremiah spoke words that appealed to the goodness

and mercy of a greater rule – the rule of God as their true king. The hope was that God’s rule, God’s reign, or God’s kingdom, might be manifested in a new way to bring hope into a hopeless situation. “The days are surely 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. In his day Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’” (Jer. 23:5-6).

Christians understand Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of messianic promises. Today we assert the gospel message that Christ is King; that through Christ all things were created (John 1:1-4) and through whom God's kingdom is established on earth as in heaven. Today, we declare that Christ is in control; Christ is the head of the Church; our leader who leads the way ahead for us.

But when we look at some of the terrible things, the injustices and corruption that have been going on and still is going on in our society, country and world, and including the Church, are we really convinced that Christ is

in control or in charge? The decline of membership in mainline churches, the atrocities that people have committed in the name of God, and divisions that have plagued the Church over the centuries can make people question Christ's leadership of God's people.

Even Christians in the time of the Apostle Paul questioned Christ's ability to truly make a difference for them. It was thought that some of the Colossians had apparently been followers of the Greek tradition known as "Gnosticism." This belief totally denied the humanity of Christ that Paul had been

preaching. It separated the physical body and the created universe from the spiritual and divine world. People who followed this understanding regarded the body and creation as corrupted by sin, evil and temporary; while the spirit was pure, good and immortal. Therefore, they could not accept the real humanity of Jesus nor believe that he was the full expression of God.

But, for Paul, Jesus Christ was the ultimate authority: “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created

through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). It was also through Christ that all things could be reconciled to God, including our reconciliation with one another, “by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). It is here that we see Paul’s profound understanding of Christ’s supremacy that is grounded not in the power to dominate, but to seek peace; not in the strength of brute force, but of humility and weakness; not on the back of the effort and sacrifices of others, but on the cross where he himself bled and died for the world.

But in weakness and death, isn't this kind of leadership and king a failure? Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus conveys the thoughts of people about him. "And the people stood by watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one! The soldiers also mocked him...saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'...One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:35-39)

These comments, like those presented by the tempter to Jesus in the wilderness, again challenge Jesus to choose another sort of king from his distinctive calling, perhaps a political figure like Pilate.

On the other hand, the words of the scoffers pose the irony of Jesus' kingly mission. He is a messiah who saves others only by not saving himself. His leadership is one that is committed to God's plan even when it involves betrayal, suffering and death. Only in the powerlessness of the cross can he demonstrate that ultimately rescues criminals,

scoffers, and flawed religious and political leaders. By refusing the voices of temptation, Jesus then defines for us what sort of king he really is.

Perhaps the only one at the crucifixion that perceived this about Jesus was the second criminal hanging with Jesus who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). He acknowledges that he deserves his punishment, in contrast to Jesus, who is innocent. He sees that Jesus will enter his kingly realm not by coming down from the cross, but by dying on it. His words are a confession of faith and an indication that

he has understood the mystery of the gospel – that even mocking, insults, floggings, and crucifixion are part of the prophetic plan that leads to Jesus’ kingdom of true justice, mercy and hope. He hears in the words of Jesus something more and different – the words of a king, whose authority is like no other; who prays for those who spitefully abuse and persecute him. He seeks a place for himself in a realm where the keynote is pardon and forgiveness not condemnation. While others in the story suppose that Jesus’ leadership and fortunes are coming to an end and in failure, the second criminal perceives that God will vindicate the King and bring him into his proper rule of peace to all people.

Things may not always go right for us in a strategic plan and we may perceive setbacks as failures that also reflects the failure of leaders. But the leadership of Christ the King encourages us that such challenges are part of the plan; and that in God's plan, struggles and failure does not mean the end for us. Amen.