

Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's not exactly
the gospel
that we expect to hear
this Sunday
before Thanksgiving.

We expect to hear
something more upbeat,
something in tune
with the glorious golds of leaves and pumpkins,
the rich smell
of turkey
roasting;
you would have thought
that the people who chose the readings for today
could have done better
than a reading that seems to belong more properly
to Palm Sunday and Good Friday,
Jesus
hanging on the cross,
those last
painful
hours of life,
before anyone knew to think
of even the possibility
of resurrection.

But the lectionary
pays little attention
to our civil holidays.
Its roots are far deeper,
far beyond
a meal shared - at least by tradition -
between the native people of this land
and hungry settlers;
the lectionary follows a tradition that goes back

over thousand years earlier
when the church first began to shape its year
by the key events
of Jesus'
life,
his birth,
his death,
his resurrection,
and his coming again.

Today
we are at the turning point:
the last Sunday
of the church's year.
Next week
will be the first Sunday of Advent
and we will begin all over again.
But this week
we focus on the reign of Christ,
his coming in glory,
and at the heart of it
the image
of Christ
as king.

Kings
aren't something
that most of us have any experience of.
A few of us here
are, or at least were, British subjects,
but it's a long time
since a king has reigned in Britain,
and although it's pretty certain
that a king will succeed the current queen,
we don't really have any idea
what kingship all look like
in the twenty-first century.

And for the rest of us, our ideas of kings
are largely drawn from fairy stories

or perhaps from fantasy fiction.
Kingship
is not something
that is part of our everyday lives.

But for the early Christians
kings were something
that they did know about.
Their kings
were not particularly powerful -
after all,
they were Roman vassals,
and were subject to the emperor -
nevertheless,
they were kings,
and had power and wealth
and were used to ordering people around
and having their own way.
After all, there was Herod the Great
who tried to get the wise men to act as his spies on Jesus,
and in a fit of rage
slaughtered the innocents;
there was Herod Antipas
who had John the Baptist executed,
his head presented
on a plate.
And it was that same Herod
who colluded with Pilate
to have Jesus
executed.

And then
there was Jesus.
The king,
the one whose rule
was so eagerly anticipated.
People crowded to welcome him into the city of Jerusalem
waving palms
and laying a makeshift red carpet
with their cloaks,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!”

But it was just
a few days later
when a crown circled his head,
a crown
made of thorns,
and a sign
hung above his body,
“This is
the King of the Jews.”
And it was like no other king
they had ever seen before.

Because
as our gospel tells us today
his kingship
looked nothing like
the kings
that the people of Jerusalem,
that his disciples,
that we
have ever known.

Jesus' kingship
was seen
as he hung there
on the cross.
Apparently helpless
subject to ridicule
and scorn.
And yet it was there
that he showed his power,
a power far greater
than any
of the Herods.
Invited
to leap down from the cross,
invited

to save himself,
he chose instead
to save someone else.
Confronted
by a criminal
hanging on the cross
beside him,
a criminal
who made no excuses
for his own actions,
but simply asked
that Jesus might remember him,
Jesus promised
the one thing he had to offer.
In the face of death,
he offered life.
"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

"In the midst of life we are in death" is the way one of the anthems in the funeral service puts it.
It's the essential paradox of our faith.
Faced with the reality, the inevitability
of death,
we claim life.

As Christians
the rhythms of our lives
are different
to the world around us.
When they are immersed in Halloween
we are looking to All Saints;
when they are immersed in Christmas
we are still waiting in Advent.

Sometimes
we feel out of step,
and wonder why
the church
can't just get
with the program.

But it's at these times, when we are most
aware
of being out of step
that we are also most aware
of our distinctiveness.
Of being followers of Jesus
who himself was that essential paradox,
God in human form,
life in death.

And that paradox
can be a source of hope,
especially at this time of year
as we begin the holiday season.

The ads at this time of year
are full of happy families,
smiling and laughing
as if they had
not a care in the world.
They are full of people shopping
for gorgeous presents,
toys and jewelry and cars.
They are full of mailboxes stuffed with mail
and presents under the tree
and a fairytale world.

It's a violent contrast
to the hurt and anger
that we heard during the election season.
People
who felt
left behind by our culture.
Who felt left behind
by the American dream.
Who are tired of struggling
and fighting
and always seeming to lose.

And whether or not
we have experienced those things,
we do know
that the holiday ads
don't really represent
our realities.

We know that family gatherings
are not always marked with laughter and smiles,
but sometimes with disagreements and resentments
and with absences,
absences due to distance
or estrangement, or hardest of all, death.

We know that some people
will struggle to put a simple meal on the table,
and that some of us won't be able to buy
those dreamed for gifts
that light up our children eyes,
but will have to make do
with the dollar store equivalent,
or give our loved ones a mere token
of what we feel for them.

And some of us
will have empty mailboxes
and might even face
the holidays alone.

And it is in the face of these realities
that Christ comes to us,
Christ comes to us
in the paradox
of life
in the midst of death.

And that life
is not only
the life
that comes beyond death.
That life is now.

We see the life of Christ now

when someone chooses to be the peacemaker in the family,
when someone else
chooses to forgive.

We see the life of Christ now
when someone quietly helps out
someone who is in need,
or gives a little extra
to the person who is struggling to make ends meet.

We see the life of Christ now
when someone lonely
receives an invitation
or even a simple card
comes through their mailbox.

And we see the life of Christ now,
life in the midst of death,
Christ working among us,
when we remember the blessings we have been given.
The way God
has been at work in our lives.

And so, I invite you now
to take out the cards that are in your bulletins.
And I invite you to write down
the things that you are thankful for.
And in particular
the ways that you have seen the life-giving work of God
in your life,
both personally
and in our church.
We will then gather them up
and use them
in our prayers.