

Pentecost Last, Year C, 2013  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Yesterday

as I was driving back from the diocesan offices in Garden City,  
I saw my first house  
fully decorated  
for Christmas.

And I mean fully decorated -  
everything  
was larger than life.

The pine trees were lit and decorated with oversized ornaments, the candy canes that were  
scattered across the lawn  
had to be taller than I am,  
and there were enormous nutcrackers  
standing guard each side of the driveway.

The neighbors  
had contented themselves with a six foot wreath,  
at least for now,  
but who knows what will go up  
over the next couple of weeks.

And it's not even Thanksgiving yet!

Today

is the last Sunday in the church's year,  
and whether you're in the mall  
or simply driving round the streets  
you can't help but realize  
that we in the church  
are on a different timetable  
than the rest of our culture.

It runs

according to a series of holidays, New Year and Martin Luther King Day,  
Presidents Day and Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, Labor Day and Columbus Day and  
Thanksgiving,  
and seasons, Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter,  
and all those are overlaid on top of the school year,  
the fiscal year

and government cycles.

But we run on different time.  
We run  
on God's time.

Instead of beginning with New Year's on the first day of January, we begin four Sundays before Christmas.

And while everyone else is decorating,  
we're still preparing -  
not by hanging lights and ornaments,  
but by observing a somewhat subdued time of preparation,  
our churches bare  
and our thoughts turning  
not only to the baby  
born in Bethlehem,  
but the King of all  
who will come at a time  
that is still unknown  
to bring in his reign  
of judgement, justice  
and peace.

But all that  
is still a week away.  
Today  
we're at the end of the year, rather than the beginning.  
We've heard the stories,  
the baby in the manger,  
the shepherds in their fields,  
the wise men following the star.  
We've heard the stories  
of his baptism in the Jordan,  
his calling of twelve disciples,  
his teaching and miracles.  
We've heard the stories  
of his welcome into Jerusalem,  
and his betrayal  
and his death  
on a hard wooden cross.  
We've heard the stories  
of the holes in his hands  
and breaking of bread

and the wonderful discovery  
that he was not dead  
but risen.

And we've heard the stories  
of his ascension into heaven,  
and the coming of his Spirit  
and the birth of the thing  
that we know  
as the church.

And finally we hear  
the story of this day,  
Christ as king and ruler and judge of all,  
who will come  
at the very end of time itself  
and bring all things  
to fulfillment,  
restoring creation  
and all of us with it  
into the reality  
it was created to be.

Today  
is the culmination  
of everything we have heard,  
everything we have celebrated  
this last twelve months.

Which is why it is perhaps not surprising that our epistle reading  
is not so much about what it means for Christ to be King -  
that's left to the other readings -  
it's not so much about what it means for Christ to be King  
as it is a summary  
of everything we know about him.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him 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, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

On Tuesday morning in bible study  
we took time to trace back  
other places in scripture  
where Jesus is talked about like this.  
We started with Christ as the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation, through whom all things were created.  
And that reminded us  
of the first verses  
of the gospel of John,  
“In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,”  
and from there we went back to the first verse of Genesis, and the story of creation,  
and forward to Hebrews,  
where it talks about Christ as the reflection of God’s glory  
and the exact imprint of God’s very being,  
and that took us to the annunciation,  
where the angel tells Mary that the baby will be called Emmanuel,  
God with us.

And on, and on, through scripture,  
until we were almost overwhelmed  
with the amazing gift  
that God has given us  
in Jesus Christ.

And that was just part of our reading today.  
We could have gone on and on -  
tracing each and every part of our reading today  
through scripture,  
gathering up this amazing picture  
of the God  
in whom we put our trust.

But it’s not just a picture;  
it’s not just theory.  
When Paul and Timothy write this letter to the Colossians,  
they’re not just doing it to give them a good education in theology.  
They’re doing it to remind them  
of the power  
and the strength  
and above all  
the love of God.  
to remind them

that God is good.

They write:

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father.”

That’s why it’s so serendipitous  
that the church’s celebration of Christ the King,  
the celebration of every things Christ means to us,  
and everything Christ has done for us  
falls at Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving  
is at the very heart  
of what it means to be Christian.

This last week,  
I was on retreat,  
which is something that as clergy  
we are required to do  
by the bishop.

It was out at Little Portion Friary, and was led by Brother Robert,  
an Englishman  
who after ten years as a parish priest  
heard the call of God to become a Franciscan brother.  
In 1967 he came to the US on a 'short-term exchange visit of a year or so', and has stayed ever  
since.

In one of his talks  
he reminded us of the old hymn,  
“Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”

He has made it a daily practice  
to count his blessings,  
and invited us  
to do the same,  
to spend time  
giving thanks to God.  
And what we discovered,  
as he did,

is that often the first one comes slowly.  
And then another one comes,  
and then another,  
and then they come faster and faster  
until it almost feels like  
you are standing under  
a waterfall  
of thanksgiving.

Because God is good.  
Even when things are hard,  
God is good.

And so I invite you  
as the end of the church year, when we celebrate our Savior come in glory to rule the world  
and as we celebrate the feast of Thanksgiving  
to give thanks.  
As we have done these last two years,  
I ask you to take the cards in your bulletins  
and spend some time now to write your thanksgivings on them.  
When you're done, we'll collect them, and they will become our prayers of the people.