

All the Fullness of God
Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20; Jeremiah 23:3-6
Christ the King Sunday

Jeremiah 23:3-6

³I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵The 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.

⁶In his days 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.”

Luke 23:33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

³⁴Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And 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!” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Introduction

Paul mayⁱ or may notⁱⁱ have written the Letter to the Colossians. If it is his own work, it was almost certainly written toward the end of his life, while he was in prison.

One of the things going on in the letter to the church in Colossae is that Paul is assuring them—apparently in opposition to what some are trying to tell them—that through their baptism, they have already been made part of the body of Christ. There’s not something missing that they need to do or find, or that needs to happen, in order to make them fully, officially, entirely one with Christ and among the communion of saints.

And so on this Christ the King Sunday we can read Colossians through that lens, and we do so beginning at 1:11, wherein he writes:

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May 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 ¹²giving thanks to the Father,

who has enabled you to share in the inheritance
of the saints in the light,

¹³who has rescued us from the power of darkness
and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son,
¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵Jesus Christ is
the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

¹⁶for 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.

¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸He 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.

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰and 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.

The Sermon

There is a chapel on the University of St. Thomas campus in Houston, Texas. It was originally designed to be a Catholic chapel, but it is now non-denominational.

What makes it a valuable and prized location for some is the same reason it is a shattering experience for others: it was designed by one of the towering figures of 20th century art, the abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko.

Professional art critics can look at a Rothko painting for hours and be in awe. Normal people can look at the same painting and go, “What’s that? I could have done that.” They’re mural-sized, and profoundly simple: big, plain shapes painted on a backdrop of essentially one paint color.

The art historian Simon Schama said that the first time he saw a room of Rothko paintings in the Tate Gallery in London, he “felt pulled through those black lines into some mysterious place in the universe...I wasn’t sure where I was being taken. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go. I only knew that I had no choice, and that the destination might not exactly be a picnic.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s because for people who do find something in those paintings, the “mysterious place in the universe” where they take you is deep inside. And for many of us, Simon Schama is exactly right: that’s no picnic.

The chapel at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, which is now called Rothko Chapel, was commissioned in the mid-1960s by a couple of benefactors named John and Dominique DeMenil, who specifically wanted Mark Rothko to design it.

On January 1, 1966, Rothko, who suffered from depression and had all the torments of a tortured artist, sent them a brief but remarkable handwritten letter of gratitude:

Dear John and Dominique DeMenil,

First, I would like to send the season's greetings to you and yours.

Secondly, I would like to say what a marvel that you exist, and that you move about in the world as you do.

The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me. For this I thank you.

Mark Rothko^{iv}

As a note of gratitude and blessing to a wise and sensitive benefactor from a deep thinker, an artist, a person of late middle age who has known a lifetime of vast professional accomplishment and devastating personal failure, I found in that short note something like a prayer, and realized that it seems applicable for all of us, particularly on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, which is also the Sunday before Advent brings in the Christmas season, which is also the Sunday that we pause to reflect on Christ's kingship of the universe and of our lives.

Dear God,

“I would like to say what a marvel that you exist,
and that you move about in the world as you do.

“The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning,
of the task in which you have involved me,
exceeds all my preconceptions.
And it is teaching me to extend myself
beyond what I thought was possible for me.

“For this I thank you.” Amen.

This is a week for gratitude, and today is a day for considering what it means that Jesus is sovereign in the universe and sovereign in your life.

I like to tell the story—still, more than 25 years after it happened—of one of Vivian’s and my first Thanksgivings together. We lived in Louisville and in addition to working for the denomination at the PC(USA) center, Vivian was also teaching English as a Second Language to international refugees, most of whom were from Viet Nam.

So we decided we should invite them over to our apartment to share with them a genuine, American Thanksgiving dinner on Wednesday evening, the day before Thanksgiving. Since she was the breadwinner and I was at home, I got to be in charge of cooking the turkey.

I had just graduated from seminary, so I did know absolutely everything there is to know about everything; so when she said, “Don’t forget to periodically baste the turkey” to a guy whose culinary *oeuvre* was mainly Pop-tarts in the toaster oven, I probably could have been a bit more attentive.

As it turned out, for various reasons, the class didn’t end up meeting for several weeks before Thanksgiving, and none of them could afford a telephone, and it was only land lines and no internet in those days, so there was no way to send out a reminder or anything. The last time anybody in the class had heard Vivian’s invitation had been in early October.

But the invitation had been made to a class of 20 or so for 6:00 on the Wednesday evening.

So it was that when Vivian came home from work at about 5:00, we waited anxiously for the throng of families to arrive, and about 6:00, the throng showed up, which consisted of exactly two young men.

If you've ever cooked for a full household plus grandparents, aunts, uncles, and perhaps a friend of the family, you know that an 18-pound turkey does pretty well for that crowd. The quantity of meat we had on the table between us looked like the Himalayas.

Being a welcoming host, I pointed to each plate and said, "White meat; dark meat." The men looked at each other and then one of them said, "vegetarian."

We didn't speak any Vietnamese, and despite Vivian's excellence, our two visiting friends didn't yet have a command of English.

I can only imagine the odyssey, the astonishing voyage of desperation and hope and raw courage that had brought them and their families from where they had left to where they had come to—a journey of the profoundest audacity that they couldn't share and we could barely imagine.

But when I think about that table, with all of that mainly useless and rather dry turkey, I still find myself overwhelmed with gratitude.

God puts people together from vastly different parts of the world, whose lives and experiences and daily fears and triumphs are as different as they could be; and somehow, as we sit across from them, what we really see is a mirror.

In God's kingdom, each one of us recognizes in the other that we are flesh and blood; we are mysteriously living organisms on a speck of dust hurtling around a small star in a reality we can barely even fathom; but we're here together.

And it is only an accident of birth and a series of astronomical coincidences that have caused me to sit on the privileged side of the table, and you to sit on the side where daily existence is a question mark wrapped in struggle and set sail on an ocean of constraining prejudices

and suspicious fears and concrete borders built around hearts and territories.

And our sovereign says, “All things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, were created in me.”

And our ruler says, “In me, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

And our king says, “Through me, God was pleased to be reconciled with all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of my cross.”

How many ways can Jesus say I love you; and because I have taught you how to love, shouldn't you also love one another?

To think about who your sovereign is is to think about what you believe God wants this world to be;

and to think about what God wants this world to be is to think about the kind of world that's worth living in, and how you want to live the life you have been given.

So many ironies on that day.

They put an inscription over him that said, “This is the King of the Jews.”

They may have done it as a demonstration of the power of Rome, to show that one who had been called the King of the Jews could end up like a common criminal, among common criminals, found guilty, utterly debased and destroyed, as Rome did with common criminals.

Or they may have done it out of mockery, since it seemed plainly obvious that no real king could end up like this, in which case they had

no idea that the inscription told the truth, and that Rome's power to kill was not the end of anything.

This is the king of the Jews. This is the king of love, who loved even the soldiers who knew not what they did, and commanded us to live and love just like that.

What does it mean that Jesus is your sovereign?

And what do you believe in your heart of hearts that God wants this world to be?

And how you intend to live the life God has given you?

Francis Evans has a prayer that says:

Your call never comes to us in a vacuum;
It comes to us in the circumstances
of our ordinary lives.

Therefore our response cannot be given
only in the privacy of our own minds;
it must overflow into our daily lives.

You call us through our family,
through our community of Church,
and through the world.

May I take advantage of the daily opportunities
that You place at my disposal
to answer your call affirmatively.^v

And I have my prayer, modeled on the words of gratitude from a tortured artist to a generous giver who had blessed the artist with the task

of taking all that he was, and all that he could do, and making something holy with it:

Dear God,

“I would like to say what a marvel that you exist, and that you move about in the world as you do.

“The magnitude,
on every level of experience and meaning,
of the task in which you have involved me,
exceeds all my preconceptions.

And it is teaching me to extend myself
beyond what I thought was possible for me.

“For this I thank you.”

Amen.

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Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
November 24, 2019

ⁱ Hammond & Busch, eds, *The English Bible Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 430

ⁱⁱ Jennifer K. Berenson, “The Letter of Paul to the Colossians” in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2105

ⁱⁱⁱ Simon Schama, *Power of Art* (BBC video series)

^{iv} The original manuscript of the letter is shown in full in the *American Masters* (PBS) documentary “Rothko: Pictures Must Be Miraculous” (2019), which is the source of most of the Rothko information presented here. Much information on the Rothko Chapel, as with Rothko and his art in general, is widely available.

^v Francis Evans, ed., *New Saint Joseph People’s Prayer Book*. Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1980.