

This is Not Right

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Canticle 16

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

If we have ever been of the opinion that we understand how God operates and moves in the world, the gospel lesson in Luke this morning proves us dead wrong. We DO NOT know how God is moving in the world. We do not know how God operates even though Jesus has told us and showed us many times during his three years of ministry while he was on earth and living among us. We think we know, but we don't, but most of the time we have trouble believing it. We can only feebly try to do what Jesus has modelled for us. We can say our prayers. We can ask for what we want and what we need but we rarely know what we actually need and we have no idea how those prayers will be answered. Jesus was the only one who ever knew what the future would bring...and he tried to tell us many times! Even when God reveals his power to those of us on earth, we very often see God's movement as a disaster and not as a revelation of both God's strength and God's love. In the midst of God's moving, we often lose track of what God is showing us or what God is telling us. In short, we very often don't get it!

Jesus was the only one who walked the earth and understood his mission and understood how God operates. Jesus was in constant communication with God throughout his ministry. Jesus was the only one who knew the correct interpretation of what was happening and what everyone was seeing. In short, everyone but Jesus was deaf, dumb, and blind when it came to understanding God's working in the world. And we still are.

It seems somewhat ironic and out-of-place that the scripture passage on the Sunday we designate as Christ the King Sunday should be a description of what appears to be Jesus' demise on earth and the brutal end to His ministry. Looking at all of it in the rearview mirror with the benefit of hindsight, we can see clearly that crucifixion was the beginning of the complete disclosure of the identity and mission of Jesus. If ever we thought we had Jesus...and God...all figured out, the selection of scripture that we just heard this morning proves otherwise.

We watch, as his followers watched, one bad thing after another, come to pass. We keep saying to ourselves, "This can't possibly be right. This nightmare can't possibly be Jesus' mission on earth." And yet in hindsight...in two thousand twenty-two years of hindsight...we can perhaps see how all that happened then was designed to work for our benefit in the long run. Along the

way, we learned quite a bit about who we are as human beings and how the human rules that we created work. Jesus came to us to shine a spotlight on the way we've managed to get the world to work and to shine a spotlight on the kind of creatures we have become. He also understood very well the systems within which he was working. They were systems developed by human beings, not the ones that God had had in mind at creation.

To those looking on, if Jesus were truly a king...King of the Jews, as the sign over his head said...he would never have been crucified by the Romans. All crucifixions were carried out by the Romans and they were public displays of brutality designed to terrify and paralyze those in the lower class and those who were *not* Roman citizens. Jesus understood how all this works so he knew that the Jewish leadership had to have convinced the Romans that he was powerful enough to be a threat even to the Romans. Even as a Jew, if Jesus were true royalty, he would not have been crucified. And if he was true royalty...even if he had ended up on a cross...he would have had the power and the influence to secure his own deliverance. Those watching mocked him because it was obvious to them that Jesus could not have been the person some claimed him to be. The Roman justice system was very biased...in favor of Roman citizens and in favor of those who had economic means. In many respects, it was much like our own system. In our system, wealthy and famous people are treated less harshly than those who are not. White, middle class and wealthy people are not convicted as often or sentenced as severely as black and brown people and those who happen to be poor. If we believe that God is the creator and sustainer of all and is a God of justice, we should allow this text to remind us of the many disparities within our *own* justice system. Such a comparison might serve as a motivation for all of us to change how our own system works. It is quite clearly unfair...and unfair is unjust.

When Jesus asked God to "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." He was most likely asking for forgiveness for everyone involved in his execution from the Roman foot soldier who actually nailed Jesus to the cross, to the Jewish leaders who conspired with the Roman establishment for Jesus' crucifixion and everyone in between. None of them could possibly have known who they were crucifying. They either didn't know or they didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God. They couldn't know that his unjust death would fulfill a greater purpose.

But Jesus left this world on the cross in order to bridge the gap between humanity with all its inequities and unjust systems so that the chasm between humanity and God could be bridged. Jesus went through the worst treatment human beings can inflict on one another and he paved the way for us to return to God in spite of all our sins. The path of forgiveness he forged for us does not exonerate us from our sins, but it does make it possible for us to take responsibility for those sins and to be reconciled to God. Being forgiven by God does not mean that God will give us the strength and determination to truly repent...to change direction...to change our thinking...and to change our actions so that we can live up to our obligations and live life in a new way. Being forgiven by God is like having a spotlight shine on all the sins we wish to

conceal and all the changes we want to make with the assurance from God that we will be forgiven by God reconciled to God just as the prodigal son was forgiven by his father and reunited with him.

The two criminals being crucified on either side of Jesus responded to Jesus in different ways. One demanded that Jesus get all three of them down from the cross. The other asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into his kingdom. The second thief had no idea what the Kingdom of God was all about, but he trusted Jesus who promised him that "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

The kingdom of God for Jesus was a world where those on the bottom of society in His day would find liberation from the systems and structures that bound them. Those who were captive...like the two on either side of Jesus...would be released. We should seek to embody the kingdom that Christ proclaimed and that we profess to believe in. Jesus explained that he was not of this world. The ways of behaving that he taught us went against our human nature but he beckoned us to follow his example. Jesus' way of behaving and his way of treating others gave us an example to try to recreate so that through God's grace and forgiveness we might be with him in paradise. Our responsibility on earth is to correct all the inequities that we can and rest in the loving arms of Jesus Christ who showed us the way of the Kingdom of God. And our responsibility is to follow Jesus' example of how we are to behave...with Christ and with one another. With God's help and power, we will be able to do just that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.