



“Giving Thanks”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
November 21, 2010
Luke 23:33-43

Why in the world does this passage intrude on the Sunday before Thanksgiving? On the very week we are reminded to share a feast and count our blessings, the lectionary pulls a page from Good Friday, recalling the darkest day in history for followers of Christ. Holy Week is still another five months away, yet this morning’s gospel reading is the crucifixion of Christ.

Those who are tuned to the liturgical calendar know that today is the final Sunday of the Christian year. Next Sunday, we begin a new lectionary cycle with the first Sunday of Advent; but the concluding Sunday of each year focuses on Christ as the king who reigns over our world.

It sounds very charming and very churchy to call Christ “King” and to declare that he is the sovereign ruler of the world. However, if we pick up the Sunday *Times* or flip on CNN or simply open our eyes and survey the landscape, we may wonder where precisely this kingdom is hiding. Most of the time it seems that greed, violence, envy and oppression have won the day.

You may have seen the chart that says, “If the world were 100 people, there would be 80 adults and 20 children; 17 would speak Chinese, 8 would speak English, 7 would speak Spanish and so on; 82 would be able to read and write, 18 would not; only 1 would have a college education, 99 would not; 75 would have a shelter from the elements, 25 would not; 83 would have access to safe drinking water, 17 would not; 15 would be overweight (and we know where most of them reside!), 17 would be undernourished.¹

With wars raging, with greed undermining economies, with terrorism spreading over the continents, with poverty crippling people’s lives, with mean-spiritedness dividing people between us and them, what does it mean to claim that Christ is the king who reigns over our world? For 2,000 years, people have puzzled over this conundrum. Can today’s passage shed even a speck of light?

If we venture back to the ancient world, to the years shortly before the birth of Jesus, we discover a moment in history ripe with expectation. The Hebrew people were anticipating the coming of the Messiah. They were longing for God’s chosen leader to appear and to retro-fit the glory days of King David when Israel was a formidable power that answered to no one. The people were yearning for a leader who would rally the troops and garner the power to boot out the Romans and to establish a nation founded on sacred laws.

In fact, following the death of Herod the Great – about the time Jesus was born – there were three Jewish uprisings led by would-be messiahs. But when hordes of Roman soldiers descended on Palestine, these revolts were squelched and 2,000 Jewish rebels were crucified.²

Three decades later, when Jesus launched his ministry, hopes were waning for God's chosen one to appear. But then Jesus began to gather a band of followers by speaking riveting words and performing deeds that dazzled. He spoke with authority like a prophet of old and he stood in solidarity with victims of injustice. He displayed remarkable courage in the face of his detractors and he confronted the unprincipled religious leaders who had forged an unholy alliance with the Roman oppressors.

However, the zealots and others became disenchanted when Jesus did not foster an armed insurrection. Jesus opposed the corrupt powers and their inhumane treatment of the poor, but to those who wanted war, his approach was pale. His method of attack was parables, not spear-wielding soldiers. He assailed his opponents with sermons, not swords. His methods confounded people. Was he the Messiah or not?

The religious leaders in Jerusalem, the targets of many of his barbs, saw Jesus as a threat. They were especially peeved at the times they were jostled and elbowed out of the way as crowds swarmed him like some first century rock star.

As soon as they spotted an opening, they nabbed Jesus at night and marched him to the court of the high priest, Caiaphas, where he was convicted of blasphemy. Next, Jesus was dragged off to the Roman governor, Pilate, who sentenced him to death.

The followers of Jesus were frightened out of their minds, but some held out hope that he would engineer an escape. Even as he trudged through the streets carrying his cross, some dared to believe there would be a last minute reversal. They dreamt he would muster overwhelming power to crush the Roman occupation and establish his kingdom. Others saw their hopes vanishing with every painful, labored step he took.

Jesus, two criminals and a crowd of onlookers – some friends, some foes – slowly made their way through the gate, outside the city wall, to the place called The Skull. When they arrived, they dropped the cross on the ground and Jesus laid down on it. As they pounded the nails, each blow of the hammer sounded a death knell for any lingering hopes.

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Perhaps that was as it should have been. He had spent much of his life with outcasts, why not die alongside them as well?

There are few recorded words of Jesus as he hung on the cross, but Luke shares some of the most powerful. As life drained out of him and he was being tormented by people screaming, "If you are a king, save yourself!" he prayed, "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

Why was Jesus crucified? Because he cared too deeply for those who were hurting. The religious authorities of his day were collaborating with Rome in oppressing the people and it was impossible for Jesus to ignore it. His compassion for the poor and the persecuted, and his indignation at the injustices they suffered, fueled his confrontation with those in power. For Jesus, the injustice was intolerable; and so, his crucifixion became inevitable.

Despite the fact that God wanted people to follow Jesus, not kill him, his suffering and death on the cross revealed the depth of God's love.

Pain, struggle and sadness are part of life. Innocents die in war; children suffer abuse; elderly live in loneliness. Greed, lust, cynicism and neglect spread like a dark plague. The cross represents the dark powers and Christ's death on the cross is a powerful declaration that God refuses to avoid the inescapable suffering that accompanies life. One theologian simply asks the question: "In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"³ How could we find comfort and strength from a God who remained untouched by suffering?

God grieves with the woman who has cancer, weeps with the widower who has lost his precious wife and stands next to the family bread winner who is out of work. When life weighs heavily and it seems impossible to muster gratitude, we remember that Christ also experienced grueling days. He can identify with our trials. When we look to the cross, we remember that God walks with us through the darkest valleys and the cross becomes the place where the seeds of resurrection are sown.

Each of us sees life from a unique perspective. Our view is shaped by people, experiences, thoughts, yearnings, beliefs, insights. One of the most powerful shapers of our outlook is our faith. Our faith awakens us to the gifts of God; it illumines the blessings, great and small, that enrich our existence. As our faith gains depth our perspective shifts, expanding and intensifying our gratefulness.

A life of gratitude – an ability to give thanks not only in the peaks, but also in the valleys – is fuller and more joyful, and never loses hope.

This week I expect all of us to take a break from our routines, to ponder our blessings and to give thanks to God. Few of us worry about having adequate shelter or clean drinking water or enough food. We do not worry about stepping on a land mine or contracting cholera or being crucified. Pray for the wisdom not to take so much for granted and to gain a heart of gratitude for the abundance of your life.

Every moment – every moment! – is a wonderful gift from God. Seminary professor, Doug Oldenburg, tells of a young man who scribbled down his thoughts one night in his personal diary. It was late one night and the young man was sitting beside the hospital bed of his young wife who was critically ill. Many of us might be tempted to choose bitterness, resentment or despair, but listen to what he wrote while sitting beside her bed: “She may die before morning, but I have been with her for four years. Four years. There is no way I could feel cheated if I did not have her for another day. I never deserved her for a single moment. God knows that. And I may die before morning. What I must do now is to accept the justice of death and the injustice of life. I have lived a good life, longer than many, better than most. Tony died when he was twenty. I’ve lived 32 years. I could not ask for another day. What did I do to deserve birth? It was purely a gift. I have no right to a single moment. Some are given only one hour, yet I have had 32 years. Few can choose when they will die. I choose to accept death now. As of this moment, I give up my right to life. I give up my right to her life, too.

But wait! It’s morning! I am being given another day. Another day to live and read and smell and walk. I am alive for another day. And she is alive. It is a gift! Another gift! Thank you, God!”⁴

How will you respond to the gift of your life?

NOTES

1. **Sources:** Fritz Erickson, University of Wisconsin - Green Bay and John A. Vonk, University of Northern Colorado, 2006; Returning Peace Corps Volunteers of Madison Wisconsin, *Unheard Voices: Celebrating Cultures from the Developing World*, 1992; Donella H. Meadows, *The Global Citizen*, May 31, 1990.
2. John Dominic Crossan and Richard G. Watts, *Who Is Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p.98.
3. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*.
4. Doug Oldenberg, “It’s Your Choice,” *The Protestant Hour*, on November 24, 1996.