

Sermon: Year C, Proper 29

Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 19:29-40

Today marks the last Sunday in the last year of the three-year lectionary cycle of readings. We have arrived at the last of the last, or, you might say, at the very end of the story we tell. This presents both a difficulty and a point of unusual focus, which are really one and the same. For how should we finish the story we recite? With what words should we conclude this long and complex celebration of the Christian Gospel? What last culminating thought should echo in our minds as the enduring promise of God to us? Choosing an ending is a hard task.

Those who were appointed to select these last texts, dare I say, did an admirable job. They almost got it perfectly right – almost. The reading of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem from Luke's Gospel is most fitting for this occasion. But, if you were keenly observant, you might have noticed that the parameters set in our prayer book, fall slightly short – by two scant verses and just a few phrases – but by one statement that makes all the difference.

Today is the Feast of Christ the King. No other feast would be appropriate. Christ is the name we bear. Christ's passion, death, and resurrection is the event we memorialize and embody in our sacraments, in our prayers, in our communion and in vocation. It announces the truth at the heart of all things. For Jesus Christ, singly and uniquely, is the image of the invisible God, the one who, in our own flesh and blood made manifest the fullness of God's own love – not just conveniently or strikingly but conclusively. So today, we are reminded of Jesus' entrance into that city which, still to this day, represents most acutely the irresolvable conflict of our own humanity. In Jerusalem our highest aspirations, seeking God and peace with one another, descend continually into tragic contests of tribal and political ownership. It is the city that inspires selfless faith, yet, at the very same time, it has provided repeated justification for horrific brutality, even that of our current battle with terrorism.

When Jesus arrived there, however, he rode in acclaimed by the masses with songs and great shouts of joy. He was hailed as the coming Messiah, as the one who would, quite literally, establish all that for which countless generations had yearned. It was a wild and dramatic moment, of such note that it was recorded by all the Gospel writers. It was an impressive and powerful surge of popular hope carried in the voices of the common folk, who otherwise were relegated to the ranks of the silent, who were normally expected to listen and obey, and not anoint their chosen king by ecstatic cheers and public ovation.

Matthew and Mark and John end the story on this high note, with the air filled with confident exaltation – and our lectionary follows suit. But Luke, and Luke alone, continued forward, for this event was not just a political coup, constrained to human voices, limited to the concerns of that specific time and that particular crowd. With the addition of just two sentences, Luke served notice that all this gladness should be extended infinitely in all directions, so that nothing was left untouched. The Pharisees,

he wrote, warned Jesus' disciples that it would be wise to quiet the people before their enthusiasm became disruptive. To which Jesus replied that if every voice were silenced, this would not be enough. For then, even the rocks and stones would begin to sing.

This wasn't just rhetorical flourish or a useful hyperbole – a politician's savvy rejoinder. It's a statement that should be taken at face value, meaning exactly what it says. This wasn't just Jesus' own measure of the excitement of the crowds, thrilling and contagious. Far more importantly, what he said announced the true measure of his authority. The shouts of the crowds would fall away. They always do. Such is our own inconsistency. But even if every living thing turned away and every lively acclamation died – even if the whole world became as silent as death – even then, Jesus said, who he was could not be stifled. For then, all that was profoundly inert, as dead as anything we can imagine, even the immense and heavy silence of stolid stone, would find voice and would ring out with rejoicing. From out of the pure, hardened, and enduring silence of granite and marble, singing would emerge. This, said Jesus, is the magnitude of God's power and the nature of God's love. It's the revelation of his life, and it was the pronouncement of that moment in time.

Within days, the authorities would bury Jesus' dead body within a tomb shut tight with an immovable stone, which bore the seal of their power and office. It was not to be opened. All this uprising was finished. He was no more, and his message died with him. But it has been our testimony ever since that, in point of fact, this very stone began the song of our redemption and of God's salvation, to which we have been privileged to add our voices.

In his poem, Seven Stanzas at Easter, John Updike wrote with uncommon directness about what is at issue in resurrection. This is our claim, he said:

The stone is rolled back not papier-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

So, he added:

let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, side-stepping, transcendence,
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages.

No, he chided, if we understand what has happened in Jesus, let us, then, with uncommon boldness, “walk through the door.”

God's deliverance of us will not be thwarted. It has eternal resilience. The world, finally, will not fall to mute darkness, nor we to the exhaustion of contests lost and cries unheard. In the end, as an end, all that has died will rise in the joy of song. On the last Sunday of the last year in the lectionary cycle, at the very end of the story we tell, I can imagine no better finish than these words: “I tell you,” said Jesus, “if all these were

silent, the very stones would cry out.” We don’t say these words enough. We don’t meditate on them to the point of believing them in our bones. We don’t hear them rising from out of every deep hollow, and we don’t make it clear to all those who don’t know Christianity that these words define the very essence of our faith. But they are God’s abiding promise, already lived through death to resurrection in Jesus Christ. And they can be our solace, our strength, and our unshakable trust and gladness. “I tell you,” said Jesus, “if all these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

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