

November 20, 2016
Last Sunday after Pentecost - Reign of Christ
Luke 23:33-43 / Colossians 1:11-20
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Someone once suggested that a person's last words summarize their personality, priorities, and perspective. After a bit of research on some famous persons' last words, here are some of the more interesting last words of famous people I found. Oscar Wilde reportedly said: "Either that wallpaper goes or I do." Winston Churchill said: "I'm bored with it all." Bob Marley last words: "Money can't buy life." Karl Marx: "Last words are for fools who haven't said enough." Pope John Paul II, in his native Polish: "Let me go to the house of the father." Martin Luther King, Jr.: "You play, 'Take my hand, precious Lord'. Play it real pretty". Steve Jobs: "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, sometimes referred to as the Sunday of Christ the King or, the Reign of Christ. We have been immersed this year in reading Luke's gospel, a richly provocative, challenging and life-upending gospel, and today we revisit the final hours of Jesus' life.

Jesus' last words from the cross in Luke's gospel do show us what kind of man he is. Jesus' first word from the cross is: "*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" It surely looked like they knew what they were doing – the people calling for his crucifixion; Pilate handing Jesus over to be crucified even though he said he could find nothing Jesus had done wrong and that he was innocent; the Roman soldiers following orders, doing what they were told to do. There as he hangs on the cross at the place called "The Skull", Jesus is a man who has every reason in the world to retaliate, but who chooses not to. This is a Lord who could easily have "put people in their place", but chose not to. This is a Lord who could exercise retributive justice at any moment – "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", but he didn't, and to some who were there, this made him weak. Some must have expected him to retaliate, hoped he would lead an uprising, and were waiting to see if he would. He didn't, and likely there were in that crowd, maybe even among his closest followers, some who were very disappointed with Jesus. Perhaps they thought the mocking and taunting would provoke him to action. What kind of king, what kind of Lord is this, who does not retaliate in the face of violence, injustice, and ridicule?

Jesus' second word is made in response to one of the thieves on the cross alongside him, who has just defended him in the face of taunts by the other thief hanging there, who has said, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us". The one who defends Jesus, seems to accept his punishment as befitting the crimes he has committed. And he also recognizes Jesus' innocence. As this thief is dying, he calls on Jesus for mercy.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus responds, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Paradise. Paradise here does not mean heaven, some place that we go to later after we die. Paradise is here and now where God reigns in love and welcomes all, especially sinners, to come home to God’s embrace, the place we are all meant to be. Here on the cross, Jesus does not just welcome a sinner he joins him and is present to him in his suffering. Literally, Jesus understands and suffers with him. While he is dying, this Lord seeks a relationship with another in need, someone rejected as unfit to be part of society and deserving of death. Jesus did this over and over in his life, met people where they were, shared with them their highs and lows, their dreams and desires, their disappointments and delights - and offered them something more. This is not a distant Lord who is disengaged, and looks on from a safe distance. This is a Lord who comes near enough to touch and heal, to teach and break bread, to weep in grief, to develop deep friendships, to grow weary, to feel abandoned and alone. This is a Lord who gives life to others by giving his own life away. This is not a Lord of separation, but a Lord of solidarity with the human condition, especially with the suffering and those on the margins who feel lost and powerless.

And Jesus’ third word from the cross as Luke tells it: “Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”* And having said this, he breathed his last.”

This is a Lord who is near to and knows God’s heart because he has spent much time communing with God in prayer, especially in times of decision and challenge. This is a Lord who, having come from God, entrusts himself to God in a relationship that lasts forever. This is a Lord who trusts in the ways of God, who at the end “lets go and lets God”.

Who is this Lord? This king, this leader was not recognizable in his time. Nor is he or his way of living recognizable in our world today.

By the world’s standards, Jesus was a LOSER. How willing are we to follow a God who became a loser, one who embraced downward mobility? By the world’s standards, Jesus used power foolishly, by using it to serve others and not save himself. Do we really want to follow a Lord who does not use power to protect himself, but who joins with the suffering of the world and shares power in order to save others? Can we serve one whose solidarity with us in our sin and brokenness breaks his own heart, and through that brokenness offers himself to bring healing and grace to us? Jesus dies. How willing are we to follow a Lord who dies? Because surely that means we will have

to do the same. Will we follow this Lord who is secure enough in God's love to become completely vulnerable and surrender everything in trust? Can we do that, trust that God will have God's way and it will be good and life-giving, even though we must let go and die to self and all that would keep us from God's love? Who is the Lord we follow?

In the past few weeks, both before and after the presidential election, I have heard several people say with great conviction that the president-elect is going to save the nation, and maybe even the world. Behind such statements there has to be intense desperation and such a deep yearning, a hope and longing that things will change for the better. We want and need a savior. I feel great sadness and concern for folks who believe this, because no human leader can save the nation or the world. There are no easy answers or quick fixes to the divisions that exist in our country. In our nation's history, leaders to whom we have looked as beacons of great promise, of light and hope, leaders who spoke truth, made difficult decisions and lived with courage have been assassinated – Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. All human leaders have the potential to do much that is good and life-giving. And human leaders also have the potential to cooperate with evil, with forces and practices that belittle and destroy life.

Now, as never before, we need to frequently ask ourselves, who and what is at the center of my life? Who is our Lord? Unexamined and unchallenged loyalty to family, nation, political party, economic, social and religious systems can lead to their becoming our lords. We can let any of these things rule over us. We can elevate them to the point of worship, looking to them for deliverance. And in doing so, we make them into idols. Idols can never meet all our needs, or fulfill all our hopes for this life. They will disappoint us. And they cannot save us from ourselves.

Who is your Lord? Who is my Lord?

Earlier this summer, there were frequent acts of hatred and violence and killing which seemed to be erupting all over the nation and throughout the world. The ongoing presidential campaign was spewing mean-spirited words, half-truths, and generally there was a disregard for honoring basic human dignity. I felt overwhelmed by all this and was really grieving over the polarization in our nation and the utter lack of respect for the dignity of others, which seemed to have become acceptable, even in some bizarre way the new "normal". Fear, anger, and frustration were being stirred and used to create division. I felt powerless, unable to do anything to staunch this continuous flow of ugliness. Praying was very difficult. Deep in lament is where I found myself. At the, at one of our Wednesday noon healing Eucharist services, I experienced an intimate God moment, a drawing near of the Holy One. It was at the point when I held

up the consecrated Host, about to break it. As I broke it, I had the clear recognition that our sin keeps wounding Jesus over and over again – my sin and everyone else's. And I felt such pain in that recognition. For a few moments I had difficulty continuing with the liturgy. In a softer and somewhat quivering voice I continued: "Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. . . The gifts of God for the people of God." That Wednesday healing service was the first time I have experienced in such a visceral and immediate way the reality of the cost of what has been done for us, and the pain that God continues to feel, and yet – the goodness and love and mercy of God continues to pour out for the healing of the whole world. The Resurrection of this Lord has the last word.

The only One worthy of our worship and total allegiance is the holy and living God. That God has been revealed to us in human form in the person of Jesus. Surely this Lord is One who can strengthen our faith in the Resurrection when it wavers. Surely this is One who forgives us over and over for all the obstacles of pride, preoccupation, and self-protection we place in God's path. Surely this Lord who reigns is One into whose hands we can commend our whole selves, our lives and our world, both now and forever.

And surely the Spirit of this Lord will give us the courage to speak up and not remain silent, but speak truth to power, will help us to defend and protect the fearful, marginalized and vulnerable ones around us. This Lord, this king whose throne was a cross, who joins us in our suffering, whose life poured out heals and reconciles – this is the king we need for this day and time, for this hour.

I pray that today and each day, we will examine our hearts and souls, and ask for the courage to see anything in ourselves that keeps us from giving our full allegiance to this scandalous, wounded and risen Lord of life. I pray that we will ask for God's grace and the help of each other in keeping our baptismal vows: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil, and when we fall into sin repent and return to the Lord; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

In this week, and in the days ahead, let us take those words from the apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians into our hearts: *"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of*

darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. . .” (Colossians 1:11-14).

Thanks be to God that the cross and Resurrection is our story - a story of truth and a reality with staying power. We are not a people bereft of hope. We are not abandoned. We know where to look for paradise. We have the right king for this hour. Amen.