

FINDING HOME IN THE UPSIDE DOWN KINGDOM

Reign of Christ – Cycle C: Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

The placeholder for the Grey Cup game this past few weeks has been Canada's new spectator sport, a kind of demolition derby with, in Ottawa, the House of Commons versus the Senate, Tom Mulcair versus Stephen Harper, and in Toronto, City Council versus Mayor Rob Ford. Righteous indignation abounds as the accusers vilify wrongdoers and the accused, with practiced sleight of hand, transform themselves into victims. The media are having a feeding frenzy gobbling up serving after serving of scandal and, in the case of the Ottawa events, piling high their dessert nappies with a rich pudding of conspiracy.

But in spite of the entertainment value this three-ring circus holds, most people I talk to are disgusted with the conduct of our political leaders. What is common to all three conflicts is how the culture of privilege has led so predictably to the abuse of power. If we had a dim view of politicians before all these misdeeds came to light, we now have good reason to be cynical. And as much as we may enjoy having our worst suspicions about the world of politics confirmed, the truth behind all these antics is quite sobering: this is not a football game or a demolition derby. The people involved are not players or stunt drivers: they are the very flawed officials we have entrusted with the governance of our nation and its largest city. The prophet Jeremiah would liken them to the bad shepherds who destroyed and scattered the people of Judah.

The sad truth is that we understand this world only too well. We may desperately want to believe in moral courage and human integrity, but we also know of temptation and human foibles. Human nature, also known as sin, compromises everybody, and hierarchies, with their concentration of power in the hands of a few, provide the perfect conditions for playing out scenarios of blind ambition, graft, and corruption. Lord Acton wrote in the late 19th century "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

This world of rule-breaking and opportunism and power and oppression, this world with which we are all-too-familiar, is the world Christ died for. And just in case we miss the point, Luke allows us to see the final indignity in the confrontations that take place on Mount Calvary in this morning's Gospel. Christ Jesus, crowned with thorns, bleeding, tortured, hanging and dying on a cross on a Friday enigmatically called "good", is now mocked and taunted by those whose power has effected his humiliation. And the insults are all about power, specifically his lack of power. American Presbyterian Katie Givens Kime writes, "It's as if the collective murdering machine is making sure to communicate that 'we're not killing Jesus because he's powerful, we're killing Jesus because he's a Nothing who is pretending to be powerful.'" But it is in their denial of what is truly of value in the world and in their futile attempts to destroy that which cannot be destroyed that we see exposed the ugliness and obscenity of human willfulness untethered – might over right; power over powerlessness.

But then, in the centre of the storm, when the powers of this world had done their worst, as it were, time stops, the taunting fades into the background, and a penitent criminal places himself at the mercy of the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one identified in this morning's Second Reading as him in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers." "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," the second criminal pleads. And Jesus, drawing on the saving power of the love and forgiveness the soldiers could not take away, says to the penitent, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." "Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death" wrote John Bell in the hymn we sing all too infrequently, perhaps because we see so much evidence to the contrary in the world around us.

It is an upside down world, the kingdom of which Christ is king. It is a world of what C. S. Lewis called deep magic; it is the world Saint Francis identified in proclaiming "it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Last year, our confirmation class spent almost the whole year reading Dan Erlander's magnificently illustrated book *Manna and Mercy*. Its practical application is in acquainting readers with the central stories of the Old and New Testaments; but its greater value is in exposing in every biblical time and

place what the author calls the “big deals,” the people who invest themselves in themselves and, in the process, defile the world of God’s creating. In chapter after chapter, story after story, we see the Big Deals, the high and the mighty, thwarted by the weapons of faith, hope, love, forgiveness, mercy, kindness. “Onward, Christian soldiers,” we used to sing, “marching as to war/With the cross of Jesus going on before.” This is the proclamation of Christ’s kingdom – the opposite of might, the opposite of absolute power, the inverse of the world in which we live. In the reign of Christ, the “powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled with good things, and the rich are sent away empty. Can we live in this world? Can we find home in the upside down kingdom?”

Today is the last Sunday of the church year and, in a sense, all the Sundays of this long season of study of the life and teachings of Jesus point to this day. Today is the day of our final exam. Can we answer all the questions correctly? How well have we been able to receive the gospel Jesus not only taught, but embodied? And the last question on the exam is the critical one because it includes all the other questions, “Can we find home in the Upside Down Kingdom?” It is critical because it takes us from theory into practice, from the abstract into the concrete. “Can we proclaim the reign of Christ with our lives? Can we *embody* the gospel for which Jesus gave his life?”

When I was first ordained, people – usually other clergy – used to tease me by asking, “Well, have you brought in the Kingdom yet?” These people knew about discipleship and how hard it is to proclaim Christ’s upside down kingdom. But they also knew how necessary it was to do so if we are ever to see fundamental change in this world that is slave to evil; how necessary it *is* never to lose sight of God’s manna and mercy for everyone; justice for everyone; peace won through justice and love for our enemies. The last question on the exam is pass-fail: “can we find home in the Upside Down Kingdom?” Jesus is counting on our faith to prepare the right answer.