

A Leader Worth Following

[Text -Luke 23:33-43]

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Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year, a day when the Church traditionally celebrates the coming Reign of Jesus Christ. So this morning, we focus on Christ coming among us - not as a humble, helpless baby, but in the fulness of Divine power and glory. I'll admit, that from a P.R. standpoint, the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas is an easier sell than the idea of Christ returning to rule the world with justice! It's certainly more fun to celebrate a birthday, than to anticipate a Judgment Day! Nevertheless, when we talk about the coming of Christ - whether as a tiny baby in a manger, or an awesome ruler on high - we're essentially talking about the same thing: the Divine Call to a radically *different* way of life.

The story of Jesus' humble beginnings, like the story of his horrible death, is radically different from the story of most rulers; just as Jesus' entire life is distinctively different from the vast majority of this world's powerful and prominent people. This morning, I'd like us to think about how these differences can make a genuine and lasting difference in the way you and I approach our Faith, and live our lives.

The first notable difference between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world, is how they are established and maintained. I can't think of any sovereign rule - current or historical - that's been instituted and sustained without the use, or threat, of force. Military might and political alliances are key in building and maintaining sovereign rule; yet that's not how it is in the Realm of Christ. Jesus tells his followers to "put away their swords," to "turn the other cheek," and to "*love* their enemies." [Which I *think* includes not killing them!] And even in the face of death, Jesus refuses to play politics with Pontius Pilate or King Herod, the Chief Priests or any other power brokers. That's because Jesus seeks to establish a completely different kind of realm - one which is ruled with compassion and cooperation, rather than fear and force.

This raises a second distinction between the Realm of Christ and the realms of this world: Participation in Christ's Realm is *always* a matter of choice; it is never forced or coerced. Now, sad to say, there have been times - and still are - when people try to force others to accept Christ's rule. Yet whether it be through crusades, inquisitions, or constitutional amendments, any attempt to coerce others into following Christ's rule, reveals a complete misunderstanding of Christ's Way. Throughout his life, Jesus seeks to draw people to himself through his positive qualities of kindness and compassion, openness and truthfulness. And though he does display remarkable power, Jesus invariably chooses to win people over voluntarily. We don't see many leaders like that; but Jesus Christ truly is a different kind of leader. Which brings up another contrast between the Reign of Christ and the reign of most worldly leaders - which is the attitude they have about themselves.

Many earthly rulers are highly narcissistic, and therefore highly committed to making themselves appear "bigger than life". To the contrary, Jesus divests himself of both heavenly and earthly glory. The Caesars not only proclaimed themselves "Supreme Emperors", they also insisted that they were *gods* - establishing temples and shrines where people were to pay them homage. Eighteenth Century European royalty nearly bankrupt their nations so that they could dress in spectacular clothes and reside in luxurious palaces, while their citizens suffered and starved. Even today there are leaders today whose massive egos makes it impossible for them to truly empathize with people who they see as lower, or less valuable. Jesus, on the other hand, takes a completely opposite approach. He graciously feeds the hungry and heals the sick, compassionately comforts the afflicted and warmly welcomes the "outsiders". Jesus lovingly embraces the poor and downtrodden, and he humbly washes his followers' feet.

Jesus lives his life with the barest of earthly possessions. When he enters this world, he is laid to rest in a borrowed manger; at the end, he is laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. As he is dying, soldiers throw

dice to see who will get his most valuable piece of property - the robe that he wore. That's a tremendous difference from the majestic garments, palaces and pyramids in which earthly rulers live and are entombed; but again, Jesus is a completely different kind of leader. He comes to establish a Divine Realm where people are more important than possessions; where giving is valued above getting; and where greatness is measured by what we do for others, rather than what they do for us.

This brings us to one final comparison between Jesus and the rulers of this world - which has to do with their final moments. Many earthly leaders will do *anything* to avoid death or personal loss, regardless of the cost to others. There's no telling how many lives have been sacrificed by world leaders in a last-ditch effort to save their own skin. In many realms, preserving the life of the leader is considered the most important thing in the world; but not so in the Realm of Christ. Jesus says, "No greater love has a person than this: to lay down his or her life for another." And then he does *just that!* So while there are countless stories about people who have died for the sake of their rulers, today you and I celebrate the ruler who dies for the sake of his people - Jesus Christ:

The One whose mission is to serve, rather than be served.

The One who reigns with kindness and compassion, rather than fear and force.

The One who gives-up his life, so that *all* of his followers might live with a deeper understanding of Divine forgiveness, love, and grace.

So....what might all this mean for you and me today? It means that on this final Sunday of our Church Year, you and I are called to do much more than simply sit and wait for the coming Realm of Christ. Today, right now, you and I are invited and challenged, inspired and empowered to help bring-about this remarkable Realm:

By actually loving our enemies, and forgiving those who wrong us;

By generously using our time and possessions to help those around us - regardless of their religion or race, background or social status;

By graciously welcoming all people into our Community of Faith, and into our hearts and lives;

By willingly giving ourselves for the sake of others - just like our magnificent leader, Jesus Christ, has given himself for us all.