

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, November 20, 2022

Proper 29, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#)

[Psalm 46](#)

[Colossians 1:11-20](#)

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

+ + +

The liturgical year is complete. The long series of Sundays after Pentecost, the long green season we call ordinary time, is coming to a close. Today is what the Prayer Book simply calls the Last Sunday after Pentecost, but is often also called the Feast of Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ. Most feast days look back to a past event in the life of Jesus. The nativity; the transfiguration; the crucifixion; the resurrection; the ascension. But today we celebrate the feast of something that hasn't fully happened yet: the consummation of all things under the reign of Jesus.

Yet it's also true that Jesus is already the ruler of the universe. He has been since the moment the heavens and the earth were made. He was when he was a tiny infant. He is today and will be forever. And he's nowhere more the ruler of the universe than in the moment when he is seemingly the least powerful of all, when the one Paul calls the image of God and the firstborn of all creation hangs on a Roman cross to die the shameful death of a criminal.

“If you are.” “If you are.” “If you are.”

That's what Jesus hears over and over as he hangs there. "If you are the King of the Jews, come down!" "If you are the chosen one, save yourself!" "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us!"

And it's as if his story has come full circle, back to the beginning, after his baptism when he went out into the desert and faced his first test, when Satan tempted him with almost the very same words. "If you are the Son of God. . . ." Turn these stones into bread, to feed your hunger. Bow down to me, and become king of the world. Leap from the temple, and test the Lord your God.

In the beginning just as in the end, the temptation is the same. To misuse his power. To turn his divine authority to his own ends.

Power corrupts, they say. And so often that's true. From the corridors of Washington to the trading floors of Wall Street to the casting rooms of Hollywood. So many of our headlines and so many of the conflicts that are churning our society today are at heart about the misuse of power. It's been that way back through the ages, in throne rooms and locker rooms and boardrooms, and in the halls of churches and cathedrals too, because religious power is one of the easiest forms of power to turn to evil.

Against that backdrop it's no wonder conscientious people sometimes find it hard to talk about power, or admit they have power, or try to get power. It can feel as if power is just a code word for domination and exploitation. But power isn't always a bad thing. Actually power is a good thing. Power is the ability to get things done. The capacity to make something happen. To change the world in some way.

Like everything else in God's good creation power can be used for good or for evil. We ascribe power to God every Sunday when we say "the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours" and "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might." And so the question is what kind of power are we talking about? Power to create, or power to destroy? Power to hurt, or power to heal? Power to enslave, or power to set free?

Here at the cross Jesus shows what Paul means when he writes that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Jesus shows his power not by destroying his enemies but by praying for them and forgiving them. Here at the point of a Roman spear, under the heel of all the power of empire, he shows his power by welcoming a thief into Paradise. In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, Jesus meets physical force with soul force. He meets Caesar's power of violence with God's power of love.

Here in church on Sundays we proclaim our faith with the Nicene Creed. But the very earliest creed, the way Christians proclaimed their faith in the first generation, was much shorter: "Jesus is Lord!" And "Lord" was a title with a double meaning, because Hebrews used it for God, and Romans used it for Caesar. So to call Jesus Lord was to acknowledge him as holding not only the power of God but also the power of Caesar. It was refusing to worship the emperor that sent generations of Christians to a martyr's death, because for them Jesus was Lord, and Caesar was not.

And again through the centuries it's been the same. In the early 1800s a young enslaved woman named Isabella found Jesus and took on a new name: Sojourner Truth. Her preaching galvanized the abolitionist movement because for her Jesus was Master, and the white man was not. In the 1940s in Nazi Germany a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped found the underground Confessing Church and was executed for plotting against Hitler. For him Jesus was Führer and Hitler was not. In 1977 Janani Luwum, the Archbishop of Uganda, stood up against the disappearances and killings of the dictator Idi Amin. For him Jesus was president and Amin was not.

There are countless others. People whose obedience to Jesus, the true ruler, has led them to renounce the world's kind of power. Sometimes they have suffered for their faith. Sometimes they have died. But whatever you call their witness and the changes it has brought to the world, it sure isn't weakness. It's a power that goes beyond the power of coercion. It's more powerful than the strongest weapon. Because it's a power grounded in the same love of Jesus that he offers to the thief on the cross.

Yes, Jesus *is* the ruler of all—and the way he rules is by being forever on the side of those who are lowest, outcast, condemned. He isn't the ruler *despite* being this way; he doesn't just happen to have a strange soft spot for those on the margins: *This is the way in which Christ is King*. This is a mystery: that through him a power is flowing into the world, a power that flows into us when we are baptized in his name, that surges in us every time we come to his table, and a power that through us is meant to transform the community and the world around us, to shape it that much more like the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the source of power. And he desires to give it away, and that doesn't make him less powerful, but more. And he will not stop sharing that soul power, that love power, until it fills the entire universe. May we be filled today with that power, the power of the cross, the power of the resurrection.