

With a Grateful Heart

Colossians 1:10-20 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 1:46-55 November 20, 2016 Pentecost 27/

Thanksgiving/Christ the King

Today's the end of the church year. Last Advent, we waited for the birth of Jesus. Then, as the year progressed, we traced his ministry through the Gospel of Luke down through the crucifixion on Good Friday and the Resurrection on Easter. Christ's Spirit came on Pentecost, and since then, our Gospel lessons have showed us how Jesus Christ taught us about God's reign. Now it's Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Church Year, and next week with the first Sunday of Advent we begin a brand new church year, we begin to tell the story all over again.

Christ the King Sunday was first proclaimed by Pope Pius XI in 1925, as an end to the church year, reminding people that Christ was king not by force or coercion, but by love; that Christ is our true king, more so than earthly leaders. It was a bold proclamation, for across Europe, dictators were starting to arise, offering to fix their nations' problems if people gave total allegiance to them. The Pope reminded them that Christ was their true king. Protestants later picked up on the idea, and we too now end up each church year by affirming that Christ is our ruler.

Today is also the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and at least at our house, we look forward to hosting a big family dinner with kids and grandkids, with a menu that has been set through the years as something that mustn't be changed. Last Tuesday I delivered 13 more Make a Meal kits to the Caseyville food bank, thanks to your generosity, and will probably deliver more next Tuesday, so many families in our area will have all the fixings for their own family Thanksgiving meals, except for the birds. We've already given thanks by the act of sharing. Thanksgiving is a national holiday, and a secular holiday, though it has deep roots in Christian history. We remember the Pilgrims and Puritans, who after the long and brutal first winter celebrated their harvest, along with the help of Native American tribes. They, in turn, remembered thanksgiving festivals in England and Holland. Many lives had been lost that first fateful winter, and so our Pilgrim forebears were thankful just to survive. The first President of the United States, George Washington proclaimed the first nationwide thanksgiving celebration in America marking November 26, 1789, "as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God".¹ Since then, through times of plenty and times of want, through times of war and times of peace,

¹ Godfrey Hodgson, *A Great and Godly Adventure; The Pilgrims and the Myth of the First Thanksgiving*. New York: Public Affairs., 2006, p. 167

through times of national harmony and national discord, we've taken time to remember and be thankful to our God.

Paul began his letter to the Colossians, as he did most letters, by expressing thanks to God for that tiny but faithful community of believers who kept the name of Jesus Christ alive in their city. He spoke of his continual prayers for them; that they live lives that are worthy to the Lord; that they do good works to help others; that they might find strength through God's might to endure troubles; and that they might be thankful to God, and filled with joy for having received salvation.

Then Paul breaks into song—or into poetry, anyway, to celebrate what God has done through Jesus Christ. You heard and read it earlier, now hear it again, this time through the Contemporary English Version.

Christ is exactly like God,
 who cannot be seen.
He is the first-born Son,
 superior to all creation.
16 Everything was created by him,
everything in heaven
 and on earth,
everything seen and unseen,
including all forces
 and powers,
and all rulers
 and authorities.
All things were created
 by God's Son,
and everything was made
 for him.

17 God's Son was before all else,
and by him everything
 is held together.

18 He is the head of his body,
 which is the church.
He is the very beginning,
the first to be raised
 from death,
so that he would be
 above all others.

19 God himself was pleased
 to live fully in his Son.

20 And God was pleased
 for him to make peace

by sacrificing his blood
on the cross,
so that all beings in heaven
and on earth
would be brought back to God.²

I think that you can figure out why the Lectionary uses this song of Paul's on Christ the King Sunday. It does lift up Jesus not only as King, but one who lived out God's saving plan in the world. Christ not only rules from above in a cosmic sense, but Christ is the force that holds everything together. The work that he started with his crucifixion and resurrection will ultimately bring everything that is scattered and divided and estranged back to God. Mariam Kamell, a New Testament professor, responds to the hymn in these words: "Because of the cross, we can live in great confidence and joy that all the things that are so wrong will be made right and that Christ has already begun putting all things right. By inviting us into his kingdom, we are partners and co-inheritors of all things made right, and so we should work for justice and the righting of wrongs; we should work for peace and reconciliation, but we do these things because we know that all of this will be done in Christ."³ Unquote.

For the Gospel lesson today, I chose a passage that might seem more appropriate for Advent, and we'll be getting back to it on December 11th. Like Paul's hymn about the risen and ruling Christ, our Gospel lesson is a song, too. It's Mary's song. After her encounter with the angel Gabriel, after saying Yes to God's wish to use her in bearing the Christ child, and when she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth, who is also unexpectedly with child, Mary bursts into a song of praise. We hear it called the Magnificat, because the first word in Latin is the verb Magnificat, which we translate "magnifies." Our translation says, "glorify," and that's good, too. Mary glorified God with joy and praise for choosing her to be part of God's plan. God did not go through channels. God did not choose a princess. God passed over women of wealth and status. God did not even choose a resident of the capital, a priest's wife, maybe, but instead chose a poor and humble girl from an insignificant village whose main crop seemed to be rocks.

Like Hannah before her, Mary praised God for turning the world's standards, the world's values, upside down. "He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed." (vv. 52-53) When we sing the hymn "Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart," we join in Mary with her song,

² Today's English Version, Colossians 1:15-20.

³ Mariam Kamell, "Commentary on Colossians 1:11-20," workingpreacher.org.

“And now let the weak say ‘I am strong’; let the poor say ‘I am rich’ because of what the Lord has done for us.”⁴

God was using Mary to fulfill God’s promise to Israel and to the world. Now that’s something to sing about. Although we live in a deeply troubled time when our nation and the world seem fractured with hatred, division, nationalism, racism, war, and injustice, we can still join in with the songs of Paul and Mary. We can still sing “Give thanks.” We can still claim Christ as our King, as our ruler. We can still live out His way of shalom—of peace, justice, and wholeness. Join in the song. Amen

By Michael E. Dixon

⁴ Henry Smith, *Give Thanks*,” Chalice Hyman 528. © 1978 Integrity’s Hosanna! Music Inc.