

***A Sermon for the Last Sunday after Pentecost-Christ the King
November 22, 2015
Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia
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In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Sunday marks the end of another church year. Next Sunday a new year will begin with the season of Advent. Today marks the occasion of the last words from Scripture that will be spoken before the new year is upon us. In the passage from Second Samuel this morning we hear King David's prayerful reflection on his reign as a gift from God. David has come to the end of his rule remembering that, with all his imperfections, his kingship had been at its best it has been when he has remembered that the source of his power came from God. The wisdom of King David at the end of his rule is that he knows the source of his power and he knows the character of God's justice and the promise of God's faithfulness.

On this final Sunday of the church year we acknowledge the faithfulness of God as spoken in the words of psalm 132: "O Lord, remember in David's favor all the hardships he endured; how he swore to the Lord and vowed to the mighty one of Jacob. The psalmist writes of the relationship between King David and God, a covenant in which David promises to be faithful to God, and God promises unconditional love to the nation of Israel.

On this final Sunday of the Christian year, Scriptures encourages us to remember God's faithful presence in our human condition no matter what that conditions has been for us. Think of Jesus' last words from the cross in which he spoke to another human being nailed on a cross beside him. He said to that man beside him, "Truly I tell you,

today you will be with me in Paradise.” There was the promise that God would be with him too. These words are meant for you and me as well. They are profoundly reassuring and compassionate and they are consistent with the one who ministered so faithfully and so justly in his short ministry. We recall how Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like that of a shepherd who cares so deeply for those in his care, like that of a shepherd who, when one of his sheep is lost, goes and searches until he finds that sheep. The paradise about which Jesus speaks is for all of us. Jesus’ compassion is for all people including those whom the world rejects.

Marcus Borg, an American New Testament scholar, theologian and author, in his book The God We Never Knew, has written, “The teaching of Jesus becomes the wisdom of God, the compassion of Jesus becomes the compassion of God, the social vision of Jesus becomes the dream of God.” That bears repeating: The teaching of Jesus becomes the wisdom of God, the compassion of Jesus becomes the compassion of God, and the social vision of Jesus becomes the dream of God.

And so we come to this Sunday we call Christ the King Sunday. Sunday after Sunday, year after year we come to this place and we proclaim Jesus as Lord, Lord of our lives and Lord of the Church. In our hymn this morning we sang of God’s steadfast love that triumphs over loss and how we bring our hearts before the cross to finish God’s salvation. It is a good thing for us on this Sunday to remember what Christ’s watching over our lives means for us, for it is a gift from God. It is also appropriate for us to reflect upon how we respond as we think of the vision that Jesus had for the world. How does the Church witness and minister to others both in the Church and in the world?

What have been our opportunities over the past year? What new opportunities will God present to us in the year to come?

On this last Sunday, the passage we heard from the Book of Revelation puts the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ at the center. Its message is filled with hope that God stands at the beginning and at the end of history, the “Alpha” and the “Omega.” It is a message of hope that God has always been faithful, that God has promised to be with us in all things and that God will be faithful until the end of time. Today, once again, Scripture calls to our memory both of the beginnings of our identity and our ultimate hope for the future. Hard as it may seem at times, God promises that hope will prevail even as we face a present reality that is all too imminent and deadly. In the wake of the recent violence in Paris and in so much that is happening in the world, we wonder, where is the presence and the promise of God in all of this? We yearn for words of grace and peace.

It is a comforting thing on this Sunday to hear once again Jesus’ words that were spoken not only to the thief on the cross beside him on that last day, but also to you and me and to a world as well that needs to hear such assurance, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” There are times for all of us when we are held captive by any number of forces. There are times for all of us when we have felt poor in spirit. There are times for all of us when hope has been illusive. There are times for all of us when we live in fear of what might happen. It is at these times that God has a miraculous way of coming to us, seeking us out and never, ever abandoning us. He comes to us as a servant to set us free from our fear. He comes to us to make us strong once again, as St.

Paul says, with all the strength that comes from his glorious power so that you and I can be prepared to endure anything and everything with patience.

What for you right now, on this day, this Sunday on which we celebrate Christ the King, are some of the fears that might beset you? Could it be the failing health of a loved one, concern over a son or daughter, a difficult circumstance in your life that will soon require some kind of decision? Could it be facing the holidays which for many can be a bittersweet time of year? Or, perhaps you have experienced a loss of some kind that has turned your life upside down. Most of us get up each morning and face the day doing the best we can to cope with and manage life's opportunities and its challenges. Some days are good days and we manage pretty well. But then come those difficult times, days when, as a friend of mine used to call it, the gone wrong department takes over and we are overwhelmed. It is this One we know as and call the King of kings, and Lord of lords who comes to us and who never abandons us in the midst of all that life brings. It is the One who comes to us so that we might once again live a life free from fear. Think for a moment once again of what St. Paul says to the Church gathered in Rome when he writes, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Paul goes on, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is the Jesus in whom we believe and whose name we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today. In the face of all these things

and in the face of so much more, may you and I go forth from this place today once again reminded of the One, and restored by the One who comes to you to give you hope and once again, to give you a glimpse of life without fear, for we live in the promise that every eye will see him... so it is to be “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come...”

And so, the last words of this church year remind us of the faithfulness of God as we begin anew another year in which God will be present in our midst to give us hope. Let us not lose heart, for there is nothing that can separate you and me from the love of God. *Amen.*