

Beginning and End

When the Gospel is read on the Last Sunday of Pentecost I often have a sense of “Wait. What?” In Lectionary Year B Jesus stands before Pilate and in Year C, this one, Jesus is on the cross. It’s so disorienting that I wonder what season I’m in. As the reading goes on you may, like me, hear about kings and kingdoms and remember that this is Christ the King Sunday. But why do we have to have Passion readings? I’ve never quite figured that out.

During my time at Trinity Cathedral the last Sunday after Pentecost has had special meaning. One year it was close to November 30th, St. Andrew’s Day, so we had a “Kirkin’ of the Tartans” to celebrate the patron saint of Scotland. Another year we had a special combined service to hear from the New Life Committee about new ventures at Trinity. Six years ago we celebrated the parish’s 175th anniversary of its founding in 1841. Last year Raisin and I baptized our younger granddaughter on this Sunday. And today, after the service, there will be a parish luncheon in thanksgiving for my ten years as Dean. Somehow this day just seems to call for a celebration.

Each of those events is appropriate for the end of a lectionary year. They help us keep the long view, just like the Gospel reading from Luke. As Christians we do not believe in endless cycles of reincarnation, like the Hindus do. Rather, we believe in resurrection, and for us time is like the flight of an arrow, with a definite beginning and end. As we approach the end of the Pentecost season the readings anticipate the end of time and the second coming of Christ. Next week we begin Advent, which looks toward the first coming of Jesus. On Christmas Day we will hear the remarkable prologue to the Gospel of John that takes us back to the very beginning of time itself.

In a way the whole breadth of salvation history opens up for us today. In the midst of Jeremiah’s customary condemnation of evil leadership that leads the people astray, we hear that the days are surely coming when God will raise up a righteous Branch who shall execute justice and righteousness. The letter to the Colossians assures us that we have been rescued from the power of darkness, and through Jesus Christ, God has reconciled to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven.

That reconciliation came through the very cross of which Luke speaks. Under an inscription that proclaimed Jesus the King of the Jews, the incarnate God in human form was steadfast in his suffering for others. He asked that his tormenters be forgiven. He promised Paradise to a sinner who repented. He would die – and then in three days he would rise again. And as we say week by week in our Eucharistic prayer, Christ will come again.

The parish priest with whom I did my seminary field work was fond of saying, “This was their parish before I came, and it will be their parish after I leave.” I realized the great wisdom of that viewpoint, and it, too, provides me with perspective. It gives me a sense of faith continuing from generation to generation. It’s a reminder that all that we have been given to us as a trust from God. We are called to be good stewards of that gift. Our faith demands it, and it’s what we promise in our Baptismal Covenant.

Today as we end this church year and prepare to begin a new one next week, it’s a good time to take stock. Keep in mind that long arrow of time and its trajectory going forward. What new work is God calling us to do now? What needs to die so that it may rise again? What is waiting to be born? As we live out those questions in the weeks ahead, let this new season we are entering be one of anticipation, hope, and promise.

[Last Pentecost: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43.]