

## Sermon: The Lord is Our Righteousness

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, November 20, 2022)

We have a new king. King Charles III is now king of the United Kingdom and the fourteen other Commonwealth countries, including Canada. For the first time in over seventy years, we could proclaim: Long live the king! Though I am not at all certain of the level of enthusiasm for such a proclamation, across various regions in Canada.

Take for example, the obnoxious objection of Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, the leader of a much reduced Parti Quebecois, whose party was absolutely steamrolled in the October provincial election, who nevertheless managed to grab headline for his refusal to swear the oath of allegiance to the new king. That episode lasted a few short days, until the speaker of the provincial legislature correctly ruled, citing an official guide, that “If a Member fails or refuses to swear the oath of allegiance or make a solemn affirmation, the Member may not be allowed to take his or her seat in the Chamber and may be deprived of any entitlements.” Knowing that he is on the wrong end of history, and the short end of the stick regarding entitlements, Plamondon quickly reversed his stance, and swore the oath to King Charles III.

Good! It is right and proper that members of parliament and provincial legislatures should swear allegiance to the new king. We are after all, here I am referring to Canada, still governed by the constitutional monarchy. Until otherwise, the head of the house of Windsor is still our sovereign, our queen or king.

The thing is, other than members of parliament / provincial legislatures and of course new Canadians sworn in during citizenship ceremony, most citizens do not and are not required, to actively swear that oath. For most Canadians, this allegiance is implied, taken for granted. It has to be so since doing so otherwise would be a logistical nightmare. Imagine trying to organize a swearing-in ceremony for the entire population of Canada, of 38 million people. That is just nuts! No kingdom on earth would ever conceive of doing something that ridiculous. Furthermore, setting aside the logistical challenges, I am not entirely sure if every individual Canadian citizen all have to swear fealty to King Charles III, this Canadian constitutional monarchy under the house of Windsor would actually survive.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this particular Sunday of Christ the King, when we acknowledge the reign of Jesus Christ, let us reflect together the nature of kingship. The lectionary passage, particularly Jeremiah 23, we hear the words of God spoken through the prophet against the shepherds of Israel, “*Woe to the*

*shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.” (v.1)* Shepherds in this context, refer to kings of Israel and Judah, who were entrusted and anointed by God to rule over God’s people with justice and compassion, with righteousness and mercy.

In the Old Testament, the office of king was aided by the priestly office, and counter-balanced by the office of prophet. Each office had a unique role to play in God’s grand design, and when working well together, this three-fold offices represented God’s kingdom on earth, with the House of David firmly establish on the throne, and with the House of God firmly established in Jerusalem. Come to think of it, that kingdom of God on earth, was brilliant, on paper, and it could’ve endured had it not been for the sinfulness and faithlessness of its ruling class—the shepherds of Israel.

During the time of Prophet Jeremiah, in the dying days of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, false prophets were dime a dozen, offering bad advises proclaiming oracles entirely of their own imagination and not from the Lord. These false prophets were essential the ‘yes people’, saying yes to whatever fancied the last three kings of Judah—namely Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Due to the successive waves of Babylonian incursions, and the exile of King Jehoiachin, there were legitimate doubts as to whether Zedekiah should’ve been made king at all. Fighting from within exasperated the military threat from without.

Most looking at that particular period of sad history from a human perspective would’ve surely attributed this scattering of God’s people to the Babylonian invasion, but God said otherwise. Speaking through Jeremiah, this is what the Lord God of Israel said concerning the shepherds who shepherd God’s people: *“It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.”* (Jeremiah 23:2)

Through the prophet, God also promised to gather the remnant from all the lands that God had driven them, and they shall once again be fruitful and multiply. Furthermore, new crop of shepherds will be appointed, so that the people of God will no longer be fearful or dismayed. Undergirding this new reality is the promise that God will raise up for David a righteous Branch to reign as king. The word ‘righteous Branch’ in Hebrew could also be interpreted as the ‘rightful lineage’. And this new king will deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the new kingdom of God, and his name will be called **“The Lord is Our Righteousness”**, which is the exact reverse and surely an indictment to the last king Zedekiah, whose name in Hebrew means ‘righteousness is the Lord’.

**'The Lord is Our Righteousness'** is more than a name of the new king, it is more than a play on word of that last king, it is an identity, an affirmation, an oath that God is our true shepherd, our true king. In time, it was revealed to us the identity of this new king, from the rightful lineage as the Son of David, came the righteous reign of the Son of God.

In Christ Jesus, God's promise to us is thus fulfilled, but his identity was not without controversy or objections. 'Who was Jesus?' is a question worth asking. Was he the long awaited messiah, God's anointed, to deliver the Israelites from oppression? Was he to lead a political and military rebellion to overthrow the bloody Roman Empire and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, once again? For those expecting Jesus to be such, even some of his disciples had expected so, their disappointment was surely great.

In fact, the identity of Jesus so inflamed the religious authority of his day, that they conspired together to hand him over to the detested Roman authority, to be nailed to a cross, hung like a common criminal. The passage of Luke 23:33-43 describes that event. It is interesting to note that even on the cross, the identity of Jesus was raised again and again. The religious leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He save others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (v.35). The Roman soldiers also mocked him, saying "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (v.37). Even one of the two criminals hung alongside him, derided him saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (v.39).

If this was in a Marvel comic, or in a superhero movie, Jesus would've jumped down from the cross, with laser beaming eyes and thunder shooting fingers, calling down hammer from heaven to smite his foes. Any celestial being with true power and authority would've done the same, wouldn't they? Alas, not Jesus Christ the Son of Man. He died on the cross just like any other human being. But something else happened on the cross. A different kind of power and authority was being demonstrated by Jesus. A different kind of theology was being modelled.

Jurgen Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God* calls it the theology of the cross. To be sure, Moltmann did not coin the phrase, Luther did. Yet, Moltmann contends that a different kind of power was manifested by Jesus on the cross, power not to dominate us but to transform us from within. Four powers were discussed by Moltmann. First, there is power in forgiveness. "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34) When the whole world seemed to have turned their back on Jesus, taunting him, casting lots for his clothing, offering him sour wine, Jesus prayed this prayer of forgiveness. Prayer from an innocent man, crucified for the sinfulness of humanity,

beseeking the Father in Heaven to forgive, such prayer has power—the power to alter reality, the power to change us from within.

Second, there is power in weakness. As Prophet Isaiah sang in this song of the suffering servant, “*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” (Isaiah 53:5) Jesus was not just the king of the Jews, he is the Son of the Almighty God. He is the Word of God becoming flesh. He is the glory of God made real and fully revealed. He has the absolute power to come down from the cross, to crush all his tormentors, to overthrow the Roman Empire, but chose not. For he realizes the true battle is fought within each of us, and true peace he gives us.

Third, there is power in salvation. Although one of criminals hung alongside Jesus mocked him, the other humbled before the crucified Christ and said, “*Jesus, remember me when you come in to your kingdom.*” In response, Jesus replied, “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” (v.42-43). In that most precious moment, two things happened simultaneously—Jesus came into his kingdom while on the cross, and that once criminal found himself in Paradise.

Last, but not least, there is power in love. “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” (John 3:16) A simple statement faith that continues to transform us, that continues to compel us to profess our faith that Jesus Christ is our King, our Lord, and our God.

In conclusion, let me leave you with these words of Douglas John Hall, the famed Canadian theologian, from his book *The Cross in Our Context*, “The theology of the cross...is first of all a statement about God, and what it says about God is not that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole creation so good, so beautiful, so precious in its intention and its potentiality, that its actualization, its fulfillment, its redemption is worth dying for.”

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**