



21 November – 27 November 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This week is the last of the Church Year. Next week a new cycle begins with Advent Sunday, but before we get there, we take a moment to reflect, one last time, on who this Jesus is, and on what following Jesus means for us. This last Sunday of the Liturgical Calendar always focuses on the Reign of Christ and seeks to remind us that Christ is a Monarch, but of a very different kind, who rules over a realm of a very different kind.

Through the Scriptures we see a growing awareness of what it means to call Christ "King". In the early parts of the Old Testament, God's Reign was seen as very much like human empires, but bigger and more powerful. The dominant idea in these passages is that God destroys God's enemies, and crushes all opposition in order to create a world of justice and peace. In the prophets, the language employed to describe God's Reign becomes "apocalyptic" (which means it is revelatory – revealing deep truths). This language is not to be taken literally, but employs metaphor, mystery, image and poetry to convey truths that are beyond human understanding. This is the same language that is used in the last book of the New Testament – Revelation. At first glance this language also seems to be about power through dominance and violence, but when we place it alongside the teachings of Jesus, we see a different picture.

In Jesus, the Reign of God is revealed to be peaceful, merciful, compassionate and just. Yes, evil is confronted, but always from a place of love for enemies. And, yes, God's Reign is proclaimed as the ultimate authority that will overcome all others, but not through violence and destruction. Rather, it is through the cross – the sacrificial, serving, loving way of Christ – that God's Reign floods the world.

This week we will open our hearts to gain a new vision of this amazing Reign of Christ.

SUNDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: John 18:33-37

Reflect: Today we get a small glimpse of the interaction between Jesus and Pilate at the trial of Jesus. Jesus is facing death, and yet he is confident and dignified. Pilate, on the other hand, who holds all the earthly power, is afraid of the religious leaders, of Caesar, and of the consequences should a rebellion break out. He has given himself for human power, but has gained no joy, peace, or security from it. Now, as he questions Jesus, he tries to discern whether Jesus poses a threat to Rome or not. In the end, although he is unable to find any real reason to condemn Jesus, the pressure of all the political forces leads him to sentence Jesus to death. Yet even the death of Christ is powerless to stop the progression of God's Reign.

Notice how Jesus describes the Reign of God. It is not "an earthly kingdom". It is "not of this world". This does not mean that it is a realm that exists in some other-worldly dimension, that we can only access after we die. Rather, it means that it is of a completely different order from human empires. Where human power dominates and destroys, the Reign of Christ heals and uplifts. God's Reign is a kingdom of power sharing, empowering the weakest and most vulnerable. It is a kingdom in which generosity, compassion, sharing, service and sacrifice for one another are the norm. And it is a realm that exists now, in the midst of our human power systems, and to which everyone is invited.

How can you embrace this "heavenly" kingdom in your own life today?

Do: Jesus proclaimed that God's Reign is "at hand" and "within us". This means that we don't have to search for it. We only have to learn to see it all around and within us. To do this, requires the discipline of listening and watching, and allowing God's Spirit to open our awareness. Today, practice this mindfulness in every moment.

Pray: Open my eyes and my heart, O God, to recognise your Reign in this world.

MONDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 63

Reflect: Today's Psalm is one of confidence and comfort in God's presence. It is attributed to the time when David was hiding in the wilderness of Judah as a result of persecution. The first part of the Psalm longs for the protection of the Temple, where those who were threatened could find sanctuary and protection. But, along with this longing comes the confidence that God's presence is with the Psalmist everywhere and at all times. This gives the Psalmist strength and hope, in spite of the difficult circumstances.

The Psalm ends with a rather violent wish for the Psalmist's enemies to die and become food for jackals. While this sentiment is understandable, and very human, it should not be confused with God's protection and care for God's people. Although we may at times feel like we would like to see our enemies destroyed, in God's Reign, even enemies become the objects of our love and compassion. So, while we can copy the Psalmist's honesty, we also seek to learn the compassion of Christ.

The lesson from today's reading is that God's presence – God's Reign – is not only visible in the sanctuary of the Temple (or our churches). God's Reign can be experienced everywhere. But even as God's Reign is constantly becoming more visible in our world, so too, must we grow in our awareness of God's Reign in our own hearts. Those violent, vengeful parts of us that are still opposed to the grace and forgiveness of God's Reign must ultimately come under the authority of Christ. Becoming a true citizen of God's Reign takes a lifetime!

Do: As we seek to live under the authority of the Reign of Christ, it is good to pray for the struggles and suffering that we face. It is also good to acknowledge when our responses to life's struggles are inappropriate for Christ followers. Today, whenever you are tempted to become vengeful, aggressive, judgemental or harsh to another person, confess it, and then pray for them and for yourself.

Pray: May the grace and love of your Reign, O Christ, fill my heart a little more each day.

TUESDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Revelation 11:15-19

Reflect: The visions of John's Revelation are often seen as predictions of the destruction of the world. For this reason the word "apocalypse" (which is the Greek word for "Revelation") has come to mean a traumatic, destructive event on a catastrophic scale. But, to view Revelation in this way is to miss the point. The writer isn't speaking about how God judges and destroys the world. Rather, he is seeking to reveal the presence, grace, and authority of Christ that is always available – even in times of great trauma. This is why today's reading describes the worship of the twenty-four elders, which comes just after a moment of great destruction. In their proclamation, these elders declare the entire world has become the Realm of God and of Christ. And God's Reign will bring an end to those who seek destruction, and reward for those who follow the ways of Christ. Immediately after this, the writer describes a vision, which, in a metaphorical way, shows the incarnation of Christ, and the defeat of the evil one. Although the images are symbolic and confusing, John's message aligns with the Gospel - God's Reign is established through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and this 'act of God' is what destroys evil.

The call for us is to follow in the ways of the incarnate Christ and allow his life to flood through every part of our lives. As we do this, we help to manifest God's Reign in our world, and to conquer evil.

How can you embrace the life of Christ in your life today?

Do: The powerful words of praise from the twenty-four elders reveal how transforming this practice can be. Through their praise, the elders open their lives to God's life, and participate in God's mission. The same is true for us. Make today a day of praise for Christ's Reign.

Pray: For your Reign, which fills the entire world, O Christ, I praise you.

WEDNESDAY 24 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: John 16:25-33

Reflect: This short section of John 16 gives us some tantalising glimpses into how Jesus understood God's Reign. The context is Jesus' final teaching in the Upper Room before his death. Just before today's reading, Jesus promises that when he goes, the disciples will receive the Holy Spirit. Now he speaks in words that the disciples find easier to understand than much of Jesus' other teachings (see verse 29). You can sense the relief in the disciples that Jesus' teaching is clearer for once.

Two aspects of God's Reign stand out in this passage. The first is that in the Reign of Christ power is shared. Notice how Jesus tells the disciples that he will not have to ask God for things on their behalf. Rather, they can pray directly in Jesus' name. There is no need for a go-between, or for them to use only certain pre-approved channels. They have the power to pray, the authority of Jesus' name, and direct access to God. This is very different from human empires.

The second aspect of God's Reign that is revealed here is that it is not a guarantee of a trouble-free life. Jesus states that we will experience trials and sorrows, but in the Reign of Christ we have the resources we need, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to carry us through them and overcome them, even as Jesus has overcome the world. As Jesus promises, our peace is not found in our circumstances, but in our relationship with Christ.

How can you embrace the peace and the power of God's Reign in your life today?

Do: The gift of God's power and peace, given to us through God's Spirit, are always available to us, if we will just open ourselves to receive. Today, whenever you find yourself needing God's resources, invoke the presence and power of God's Spirit, and trust God to carry you through your struggle.

Pray: Come, Holy Spirit, and fill me with your peace and power.

THURSDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Reflect: The Church Year is almost ended, and we turn our hearts now to prepare for Advent Sunday, and to the new year that lies ahead. As always, Advent begins with the end in mind. Although it is a time of preparation for Christmas, it is also a time when we put the incarnation, and God's work of salvation, in context. Everything that God has done, is doing, and will do in the world is working toward God's ultimate goal – a universe that is whole and one in Christ. Advent begins with this future consummation.

Today's reading is from the first letter to the Thessalonian church. The believers were beginning to grow despondent and wondering whether Christ would ever return. But the apostle reminds them to stay alert and watchful. This mindfulness was necessary not just to remain confident in their future hope, but for the believers to live with conviction in *this* life. They needed to encourage one another and be aware of God's presence with them in this life.

We need the same assurances. It can be tempting to "check out" of this world and live as if the only important life is the one waiting for us after death. It can be tempting to get so caught up in trying to predict Christ's coming that we stop living now. But this is to deny the presence of Christ among us, and to fall into a fantastical faith that has little relevance for our lives. Even as we hope in the future fulfilment of God's Reign, we need to stay aware of the coming of God's Reign each day in our own lives and neighbourhoods.

Where do you see God's presence coming to you today?

Do: When we remember that the coming of Christ always works in three time frames – Jesus has come, is always coming, and will come – we are able to remember God's presence within us and around us, and we can celebrate the coming of God's Reign now. Today, use your thanksgiving to remember that God's Reign is not only in the future, but with you and within you.

Pray: Thank you, Jesus, that you are always coming into my world and into my heart.

FRIDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Nehemiah 9:16-25

Reflect: The words of Nehemiah, which we read today, are part of a longer discourse. It is basically a confession of the sinfulness of the people, which, in Nehemiah's view, contributed to the downfall of the nation. Yet, throughout the years of unfaithfulness on the part of God's people, God remained faithful. Nehemiah acknowledges this and calls for the people to recognise it as well. As we read this account it becomes clear that one of the primary mistakes of God's people was their failure to be aware of what God was doing among them. In the wilderness they yearned to return to Egypt, even though it meant slavery, because they took God's sustaining presence for granted. When they conquered the Promised Land, they treated the nations whom they conquered in the same way as they had been treated by the Egyptians, forgetting the grace that they longed for, or that God had taught them. Then, as they prospered, they enjoyed it selfishly, forgetting the God who sustained them and who called them to generosity and justice.

It is easy for us to fall into a similar failure of awareness. As we learn to live in God's Reign, we can begin to feel that it is like a human empire which must conquer all, and which gives us power and prestige. We can forget the grace and presence of God that sustains us and forget to live with justice and compassion.

As we now move into the season of Advent, the call is for us to nurture our awareness of God's ways and God's presence. Only this can keep us faithful in following Jesus. Only this can transform us into people of generosity, forgiveness, grace, love and peace. What keeps you from being mindful of God today?

Do: Confession is not about creating a shameful list of our failures. It is about recognising the truth about our lives so that we can learn and grow. As you seek to be more aware of God's presence and power in your life, confess those things that distract you or keep you from being mindful.

Pray: Teach me to keep my eyes and heart open to your always-coming Reign, O God.

SATURDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Luke 21:20-24

Reflect: Today's reading is a preparation for tomorrow's Advent Sunday reading. It contains just five verses – the ones just before tomorrow's Gospel. This means that these verses offer some context for tomorrow, and for the Advent call to be more aware.

Jesus makes it clear here that he is speaking about the destruction of the Temple. Although the passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke that deal with the "signs of the times" are usually interpreted to be about some future end time, they are really about the past. For Christians who had seen Jerusalem sacked and the Temple destroyed, the images in these passages were all too real. The might of Rome raised all sorts of questions for these early believers about the reliability of God's Reign. But it was exactly because some of God's people chose the way of violence that they brought Rome's wrath down on all. Somehow we still haven't learned that violence always breeds more violence, and, in the end, we all lose.

Yet, in spite of all this, in the verses that follow this section, Jesus affirms that God's Reign is still at work. But it does not conquer the world as Rome did. It does not engage in power games with human empires. Rather, it wins the world through love. This may take longer, but in the end it is far more effective, and it means that there are no losers.

Where do you see God's Reign at work in the suffering of our world?

Do: One of the hardest practices of Christian discipleship is to reject revenge and seek reconciliation with those who oppose us. When we open our hearts to all people, even enemies, we will get hurt, but our lives will never become cold and hard. If we seek truly abundant life, learning to welcome all people is one of the key ingredients. Try it today.

Pray: Help me to keep my heart open, O God, even to those who have hurt me.