

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 20 November 2022

*O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

### ***Reign of God on the cross***

A long time ago in China, a man from the State of Chu was selling spears and shields. He boasted about his shield, saying, “It is so tough that nothing can pierce it.” He then boasted about his spear, saying, “It is so sharp that it can pierce anything.” Someone asked him, “What will happen if you pierce your shield using your spear?” The man was speechless. The questioner's logic was that a spear that could pierce anything and a shield that could be pierced by nothing could not exist simultaneously. The story was included in a third-century B.C. philosophy book, Han Fiez, and became the origin of a word for paradox. In Chinese, paradox is literally translated as ‘spear-shield.’<sup>1</sup> The reading in Luke testifies that the reign of God is revealed on the cross – through crucifixion. From a worldly perspective, the cross thereby crucifixion reveals the reign of God is just absurd – paradoxical. The cross is the symbol of the powerless. Why would God need the cross to reveal God's sovereign power? That doesn't make sense to us as much back then. It is our theme for today through the meaning of the cross, the reign of God in scripture, and the reign of God in the church.

### ***The cross***

Luke reports the scene of the crucifixion vividly, although the description of the crucifixion itself is brief. The people stand by, watching. They are not just watching Jesus but commenting on his work and life as a whole. The leaders scoff at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”<sup>2</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”<sup>3</sup> It is not too difficult to see what they are thinking about Jesus on the cross. Indeed, a Messiah and the king of the Jews would have saved not only others but himself. Even one of the thieves says the same thing to Jesus. All these comments and demands imply that Jesus' messianic work, including all miracles and his kingship – e.g. Son of God cannot go together with crucifixion – a paradox.

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<sup>1</sup> 矛(spear) 盾 (shield)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:35

<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:36

While jeering at him, they are unaware that they reveal Jesus' identity by calling him - Messiah, God's chosen one or the king of the Jews. Even if we are at the very scene of crucifixion, we can't help but think the same as they did. But it is exactly the point Luke challenges us to expand our notion of the reign of God and who deserves mercy.

In this reading, what surprises us the most, thereby even paradoxical, is in v 34 when Jesus prays to God, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And the other is on the cross in v 43 when he says to the thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." When everybody thinks that Jesus' life is finished as nothing can be done by him, from the cross, forgiveness is granted to the executioners, and unconditional grace is given to the repentant thief. The power to forgive and grant admission to paradise is not deprived despite the crucifixion. We may call it the reign of God on the cross.

### ***Reign of God in scripture***

The reign of God begins by proclaiming the promise of God under any circumstances. In Jeremiah 23:1-6, we see how God is going to restore Israel from exile. In these verses, God announces "regime change" in Judah through judgment and promise. It doesn't mention much about the death, destruction and massive dislocation of the exile. Rather it attributes the exile to royal wrongdoing and divine house cleaning. As such, the Babylonian defeat of Judah is neither a tribute to Babylonian moral superiority nor a sign of divine abandonment, but the corrupt leaders who failed to protect them. Now God promises to raise up new shepherds for the fold. As if Jesus' forgiveness and grace are proclaimed on the cross, God's promise is proclaimed while they are still living in exile.

The reign of God is inclusive good news to all. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus proclaims the words of Isaiah at the beginning of his public life and his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free." Jesus is proclaiming the reign of God - a time when all of creation - all of human life - will come under the dynamic power of God's love. The reign of God is God's love over all of us, within all of us. The reign of God is the love of God according to which we live. When the reign of God is lived by all of us, and when it's come to its fullness in everyone,

especially the poor,<sup>4</sup> will have the good news proclaimed to them. Here the poor doesn't necessarily mean materially poor, but those who need God's protection. When Jesus says blessings to the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God,<sup>5</sup> its initial meaning is about the poor who are under God's special protection. But Jesus' proclamation exposes the insufficiency of any earthly system of values by commencing the reign of God in the present. In doing so, God, through Jesus' proclamation, overcomes Israel's failure to keep the law, a failure that cannot be lessened by recourse to any previous salvation identity or titles.

Therefore when Jesus says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" at that synagogue in Nazareth, he's saying the reign of God is happening now. For us, however, we don't seem to feel as such. We don't see the love of God over all of creation, drawing all of us into a oneness where everyone has the fullness of life, and every person's basic needs are met. In the Reign of God, all of creation is supposed to be transformed. Yet, we don't see it today. What are we supposed to do?

### ***Reign of God in the church***

In the present, the church seems to decline, and the future of the church looks bleak and helpless. But before we feel disheartened, we realize that the beginning of the church was from the cross. On the cross, Jesus had to endure all the mockeries "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent."<sup>6</sup> Yet the life of the church is grounded in Easter, which proclaims the reign of God on earth onwards. In our story time, we heard a very absurd story titled *Stuck*. When we hear it, the first response may be that it's just a silly children's story, as that kind of thing cannot happen in the world. But we may answer well to the question, 'What might be a great idea to unstuck everything from the tree?' as we witnessed that God made everything anew through the cross. One possible answer may be that the author/we will write the story anew. As for unbelievers, our faith and life in Christ look absurd and even paradoxical because we proclaim the reign of God in Jesus, who died on the cross. How do we communicate such a paradox with people who say it is absurd? May God help us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> πτωχός (ptokos) - According to O.T. and broader oriental understanding, the poor person stands under the special protection of the deity.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:20

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 53:7

